

# Ecclesiastes 3.1–8

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## *Something More*

St Editha's Amington

Sunday 13 November 2016

Remembrance Sunday

### **2016**

Well, it's been quite a year so far hasn't it? From a number of much-loved celebrities passing away, to the rise of far right-wing politics in Europe, the shock after the UK voted to leave the EU, Vladimir Putin flexing his muscles through Russia's increasing involvement in Syria, and now Donald Trump's surprise election victory in the USA – it has been quite a tumultuous year. I confess I have felt quite unsettled by it all, to the point where I have had to stop reading things posted on Facebook.

Such widespread change and uncertainty can be difficult to handle.

Ecclesiastes is traditionally regarded as King Solomon's reflections towards the end of his reign. He was looking back on life, passing on wise advice to his children, to help them find the proper perspective on life.

Do any of you remember the BBC TV show *Grumpy Old Men*? It was on a few years ago. Various older male celebrities were put on camera, to complain about celebrity culture, the lack of respect for older people, declining moral standards, and how policemen, doctors, and (yes) vicars are getting younger.

Ecclesiastes can read a bit like that: the ancient version of *Grumpy Old Men*. **There's nothing new under the sun**, it says (1.9), everything that's born will one day die (3.2). Everything we have one day we will lose: **all come from dust, and to dust all return** (3.20). Famously the refrain of Ecclesiastes is this: **meaningless, meaningless: everything is meaningless** (1.2 etc).

It all sounds very much like *Grumpy Old Men*: what's the point? Why bother?

Well thankfully, when we dig a little more deeply into Ecclesiastes, that's not what Solomon means at all. He wants to jolt us out of complacency, to show us how things really are. He is trying to turn us away from things that are only temporary, towards the only thing – the only *one* – who is *constant*: God.

# Perspective

**There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens...** (1). We might add: there is a time for winning elections, and a time for losing elections.

In the middle of a storm, it is difficult to see how things could be any calmer. In the middle of pain, it is difficult to see how things could be happier. But everything has its time, Solomon says: nothing lasts forever, nothing is permanent. For every dark night there will be a dawn, and for every 2016, there will be a 2017. And, for every shining day, eventually darkness will fall.

Instead of pushing us into a deep depression about the world and its futility, this truth is intended to help us see the bigger picture of life: that it is difficult, that it has great highs and great lows, that it is a constant up and down mix of struggles and joys. That's normal, Solomon says – so enjoy the good bits, and when the bad comes, know that it will not last forever.

Now, I don't think Solomon is approving of that. He isn't saying it's a *good* thing that there is **a time to weep and mourn** as well as **a time to laugh and dance** (4). That's simply how things are in this life. Part of wisdom is being honest about how things *actually* are.

So when he says there is **a time for war and a time for peace** (8), he means that sometimes war is unavoidable, *not* that sometimes war is good. Personally, I'm not sure I would ever use the word 'right' to describe a war – but even war has its time. Sometimes war is necessary, sometimes it is the least bad of the options we are faced with, and today of course we remember all those who have made the ultimate sacrifice and given their lives fighting for our freedom.

Sometimes people say, 'everything happens for a reason'. But I'm afraid I think that's nonsense. One of the reasons the world can be so painful is the senseless and needless nature of suffering, so much of which is caused by war.

In Syria, 11 million people have had to flee their homes, nearly half to neighbouring countries. In Jordan, 1 in 10 people are Syrian refugees. In Lebanon, it is 1 in every 4. According to the UN, well over half of the pre-war population are now in need of humanitarian assistance.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.mercycorps.org/articles/iraq-jordan-lebanon-syria-turkey/quick-facts-what-you-need-know-about-syria-crisis> (accessed 13 November 2016).

‘Everything happens for a reason’? Nonsense. Everything has its time, true, but that doesn’t mean everything is *good*. Wisdom means being *honest* about how the world is, and honestly, there is so much senseless violence in the world it hurts.

Solomon wants to acknowledge that pain. He isn’t saying it’s ok, or good – but it is real. There is no glib soundbite here, but an honest assessment of how things *actually* are. This is the big picture, the right perspective on life that Solomon wants to pass on to his children.

This is how it is: but it is not *all* there is.

## Something More

Shortly after our reading, Solomon says: **God has set eternity in the human heart** (11). This is the sense we all have of there being ‘something more’, that this – *gesture around* – can’t be *it*. Don’t get me wrong, I love my wife, I love it here, I love the beauty of creation, I love technology, driving my car, and going on holidays – I love all that... but *surely* there is more to life than this?

There is: **God has set eternity in the human heart**. Within each one of us is a longing for something more – a longing that can only be satisfied in God.

Everything we can see, hear, smell, taste and touch is transient, temporary – *meaningless* to use the language of Ecclesiastes. It satisfies for a moment – but we end up wanting more – always *more*. That's why money doesn't satisfy: because 'more' is never 'enough'. In fact, Solomon says: **whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income** (5.10). Wealth and possessions cannot satisfy our deepest longing.

That is where God comes in. Today we remember the women and men, particularly but not only those who fought and died for our country. Their sacrifice echoes the greatest sacrifice of all: Jesus himself, who like them gave his life for freedom – the freedom not of one country, but of the whole world.

Jesus' death is the ultimate big picture, it gives us the only true perspective on life. It reminds us that the world is damaged, that *we* are damaged, bruised and broken – that though there is good, there is also something rotten within us, in our hearts. That is a difficult and painful thing for us to hear. We tend to think that *other people* are the problem, not *me*.

But that is deluding ourselves, denying the truth. Look into your heart and ask yourself, is there *really* no malice, no gossip, no anger, no jealousy, no envy, no greed, no bitterness in there?

Remember: wisdom means being honest about how things really are. If we were all truly honest about the state of our own hearts, would there be so much violence in the world?

Jesus told a story about a young man who squandered his father's inheritance – we are that young man, taking the life God has given each of us, and then ignoring his best way to live that life, thinking we know better than our Creator. One of my favourite bands has a song that says, 'we are bruised and broken masterpieces – but we didn't paint ourselves.'

And thankfully, our painter is not finished with us yet. Jesus' story does not end with the young man, alone and afraid, having lost all his inheritance. No. One day, he came to his senses, and he remembered that there is something *more*. So he decided to go back home. He didn't think his father would accept him back as a son, so he decided he would be content to live as one of his father's hired servants instead.

So off he trudged, back home – but, while he was a long way off, his father saw him, and *ran* out on the road to him, threw his arms around him, and said, 'Welcome home, my *son*.'

The son in Jesus' story discovered that in his life, there was a time for wealth, and a time for hunger, a time for joy and a time for pain, a time to run away and a time to say sorry, and come home.

What time is this for you?

By rights, and according to Jewish custom at the time, the father could have shamed and shunned his son for bringing dishonour to the family. But he didn't: he said, 'Welcome home, *son*.'

In Jesus' story there are two phrases that I love: 'he came to his senses' and 'while he was still a long way off'.

The son didn't have to prove himself to his father, he simply had to come to his senses and turn back home.

The son didn't have to walk all the way to the front door, because while he was still a long way off, his father came running to him.

That's why Jesus died. He made us, and so he knew that in our own strength we could never prove ourselves to God. He made us, and so he knew that in our own strength we could never find our own way home.



So he died, in our place, to pay the price for all our mistakes, for the mess in our lives that we can't get rid of by ourselves. He can take all that away, and bring us before our Father in heaven, who throws his arms around us and says, 'Welcome home, my child.'

All we have to do is come to our senses, like the son in the story, and turn back to God, who is always there, ready and waiting to welcome us home. If you feel a long way off, that's fine too – because the Father is ready to come to us and welcome us home.

That doesn't mean life will be easy – far from it. But it *does* mean we can restore our relationship with our Father, our Creator, and start living the way he always intended for us to live. It *does* mean that the desire for something *more* will find its fulfilment in the only one who can satisfy our deepest and most heartfelt longings.

There is a time for everything. Today is a time for remembrance – and I hope that we remember, not only those who died in service of our country, but Jesus too, who died for our freedom, who died so that we could come to our senses, and turn back to our heavenly Father, who is ready, while we are still a long way off, to throw his arms around us and say, 'Welcome home, my *child*.'