



Weekly worship resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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Issue 19

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Today's reading

Ecclesiastes 3: 1–15 (“Everything has its time”)

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;
a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.

What gain have the workers from their toil? I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover, he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. I know that whatever God does endures for ever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him. That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what has gone by. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

Great God, your love has called us here (CH4: 484)

The praises of the Lord our God (CH4: 50)

Hands to work and feet to run (CH4: 523)

For the beauty of the earth, for the beauty of the skies (CH4: 181)

In the Name of the Father and of

This sermon was preached in a summer service in 2010 when our theme for the season was “books of the Bible”.

Our reading today comes from the book of Ecclesiastes, one of the “Wisdom” books of the Hebrew Bible. When we speak about “the Wisdom literature” we are talking about books that wrestle with what it means to live, and with what it takes to live well. In this sermon we are going to home in on just two of those books: volumes that try to get to grips with life and living: the Book of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

I wonder what you would say if you were to be asked this question: “How should I live my life?” It is just that type of question that we are dealing with today: a very practical sort of question that should certainly be asked here in church, but might just as easily be asked in the home, in the school, in the wider community.

“How should I live my life?” is not a uniquely religious question in any sense. Anyone can ask it, as hopefully everyone *will* at one stage or another. As the biblical scholar Marcus Borg says:

As we explore these books, we will not only taste the riches of Israel’s wisdom tradition, but also become aware of an intense and probing dialogue – even a conflict – within it. Is life as simple as knowing the right things to do and doing them? Does everything work out if you live right? And if life is not so simple, but is actually much more complex (even mysterious) what does that say about the nature of God, the purpose of life, and how we are to live?

Big questions then! Questions of life. Questions of God.

In the Book of Proverbs chapters 1 to 9, we read a series of “wisdom poems” praising wisdom and warning against folly. In these poems from the start of the book, righteousness is contrasted with wickedness. The path of life is held up as a good way to travel, while the route of death is condemned as a bad path to walk. In short, Proverbs chapters 1 to 9 reveal to us, our various choices in life – whether good choices or bad choices.

So then, what is the way of wisdom? Quite simply, according to Proverbs, it is founded upon “the fear of the Lord”. For us to make sense of this word “fear”, we need to get away from our everyday thinking: we all know that we fear bad things; we fear cruel things; we fear things that are going to do us harm. So is that what “fear of the Lord” is all about?

No, not at all.

Borg tells us that fear of the Lord is quite different from all of that. Fear of the Lord in the biblical sense covers such splendid and inspiring notions as “awe, wonder, and reverence in the presence of the One who is the maker of heaven and earth and the Lord of life and death.” So, “fear of the Lord” is all to do with recognising the awe and the wonder of the living God, who is here with us, yet who transcends all Creation.

At the tenth chapter of Proverbs, the book suddenly changes its tone to become a collection of neatly formed, memorable sayings: “proverbs” in the standard sense of the term. Marcus Borg describes these proverbs as being like “snapshots, depicting the wise and foolish ways” of living. To our modern brains, these seem to offer assurances of material gain to those who do right: a potentially misleading line that can drag believers into the murky depths of the so-called prosperity gospel” in which riches imply God’s blessing. To counter this, let’s move on to see another voice in the Wisdom literature: the uncertain voice of Ecclesiastes ...

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

One of this book's key themes is summed up in the phrase: "Vanity of vanities: all is vanity." If we dig deeper we find that the Hebrew word which comes to us as "vanity" also has another set of meanings: breath, vapour, mist, fog. Ecclesiastes tells us that so much of life is hard to grasp; so much of life is coming and going, clouding our vision all the while.

Just look at a single verse from the book:

In my vain life I have seen everything: there are righteous people who perish in their righteousness, and there are wicked people who prolong their life in their evildoing.

Wow! This certainly seems to be a very truthful assessment of what life can be like for many people. Ecclesiastes does not drag us down the later Proverbs' prosperity path – far from it.

Borg asks us to hear The Byrds' '60s rock song version of this passage, with all its contrasts:

A time to be born, a time to die.

A time to plant, a time to reap.

A time to kill, a time to heal.

A time to laugh, a time to weep.

The song seems at first sight to present each pairing as a *choice* to be made by the listener. What are *you* going to go for? The time of breaking down or the time of building up? The time of mourning or the time of dancing? If that's what life holds out to you, which option are *you* going to take? However, the singer's inflection is not the inflection of the author of Ecclesiastes, so Borg dismisses this way of reading the text. Life is not a matter of simple black and white choices.

Borg offers us another way of approaching this famous reading. "Imagine," he says, "these same words read by the Dalai Lama. The meaning would be very different. Not '*this* versus *that*'. ... Rather: 'Live fully, whatever time it is. *Be present to what is.*'"

It's not that God is absent in any way. "God is simply beyond all our attempts to domesticate the divine." And all the talk of vanity simply points to the futility of grasping at mystery.

OK, but that still leaves one big, big issue. What about death? Is death to be viewed as some grim reaper, clad in black with his scythe at the ready to mow us all down, while he beams a ghastly grin across his terrifying skull? No. The role of death in human experience is quite different and should be considered with great care. For Ecclesiastes, death is there in life as a constant reminder of how misguided we can be in our seeking after things that can only count for little. And more than this, death stands in the background of life, as an instructor in the ways of true living. As Borg puts it: "the awareness of death teaches us about what is important in life."

In short, and very beautifully, Ecclesiastes teaches the reader to lead a simple life:

Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart ... Enjoy life with the wife whom you love. ... Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might.

We are to live strongly, not tentatively. We are to live fully, without holding back. Yes, death is indeed real, but Ecclesiastes seeks to challenge us, to shepherd us into the here and now, so that we can "seize the day" in a good way; in a *right* way.

Ecclesiastes takes on the realities of life in the midst of death. This is a "subversive wisdom", moving us beyond the expected and the conventional. For this road is the road less travelled. And perhaps it is the road that can lead us to many priceless insights. Amen.

Praying for others

God of wisdom,

In all that life offers and in all that life disrupts,
there we find you with us.

The path of life is full of challenges
as well as joys.

When we question the struggles we face,
remind us that a life fully lived
is not one that is free of difficulty.

In this time of lockdown,
we remember all of those who have worked
with devotion and energy to care and support,
bringing light into the lives of others.

We thank you that in times of weeping, as in times of laughter,
light can always be found in your loving presence
and in the love of one another.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

And finally ...

Abigail Morrison considers face masks:

On Wednesday this week – the very first day I was allowed to – I went to the hairdressers. Oh joy! Who knew getting one's shaggy mane cut could feel so good? I took the train in. On both the train and in the hairdresser's, I had to wear a face-covering, of course. I have worn them before but have never needed to have one on for longer than 5 minutes up until now. It was a salutary lesson.

The first thing that happened was that my glasses steamed up so I couldn't see properly for several minutes. That occurred every time I put my mask back on to enter another building or train carriage.

The next thing was that it felt slightly awkward to breathe – never a pleasant sensation.

The third effect was that I got quite hot under the mask. I'm surprised I didn't end up with a red face when I took the mask off. Though, thinking about it, maybe I did because I couldn't see myself when I removed the mask.

The fourth downside was that no-one could hear me well when I spoke to them – I quite often had to repeat myself. It makes you realise how much we use lip-reading in every-day hearing.

Then, after a while, I got sore ears from the elastic holding my mask on.

And finally, when I took the mask off, my specs had invariably got tangled in the elastic, so I nearly pinged them to the ground.

The salutary lesson? I only had to wear my mask for, at the longest, a couple of hours. Remember all the medical staff who have to wear far more cumbersome masks and other PPE for many, many hours at a stretch.