THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches
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Today's Bible reading

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 ("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. Amen. *(NRSV)*

Today's hymns

Let all creation dance (CH:149)
When in our music God is glorified (CH:203(1))
Angel voices ever singing (CH:498)

Although the book of Ecclesiastes is very, very ancient, it sounds curiously modern, especially chapter three, from which we read today. And how many of us, I wonder, came across the words of the passage and heard in our heads the tune of "Turn, turn, turn", as performed by the country rock group, The Byrds, in the 1960s?

Yes, this is ancient wisdom for our modern age.

What is Ecclesiastes all about? One of its key themes is summed up in the phrase: "Vanity of vanities: all is vanity." If we dig a little deeper we find that the Hebrew word that comes to us as "vanity" also has another set of meanings: breath, vapour, mist, fog. In other words, Ecclesiastes hammers away again and again at the idea that everything in life is hard to grasp; everything in life is hard to pin down; everything in life comes and goes; everything in life clouds our vision, which might otherwise be clear.

"Vapour of vapours: all is vapour."

"Mist of mists: all is mist."

"Vanity of vanities: all is vanity."

Just consider a verse from Ecclesiastes, and contrast it with some of what we saw last week in the Book of Proverbs:
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 honest – a very truthful – assessment of what life can be like for so many people. Ecclesiastes does not pull its punches in any way.

So much for life. But at the end of life? What then? Well, there's death. That's what Ecclesiastes says, anyway.

So is that all there is to Ecclesiastes? The fog of nothingness, and then … oblivion? That's not a very cheery message for the very height of the summer! Fear not, however, for help is at hand. Rather than falling into a deep slough of despond, in which we retire to a darkened room to listen to our Leonard Cohen LPs, we would do well to listen to Marcus Borg, who suggests that we really need to think this one through. Borg is a brilliant bloke, and he is able to look at what Ecclesiastes is saying and interpret it in some rather wonderful ways.

Let us hand over our reading from this morning to the good professor, and see what he can do with it. In fact, Borg takes that famous passage from chapter 3 and he invites us to hear the words in three quite different ways.

Firstly, he invites us to hear the song by The Byrds, 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 to present each pairing as holding contrasting options to be considered and chosen by the listener. What are you going to choose? The time of killing or the time of healing? 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 choose?

However, the singer's inflection is not the inflection of the author of Ecclesiastes, so Borg dismisses this first way of reading it. Life is not a matter of simple black and white choices.

Let's move on to Borg's second way of reading this text. This is a bit like a Swedish arthouse film which wallows in existential angst, and unbearable bleakness. Many see Ecclesiastes as a hopeless book which just dwells on the worst of everything, whether that be injustice, suffering or death. Indeed, many gifted scholars read Ecclesiastes in just such a way. But Borg has his doubts about that approach too. He doesn't see Ecclesiastes as a depressing and despairing read.

As noted a moment ago, fear not, for Borg offers us a third way of approaching this famous reading, and a very stimulating way for us to consider."Imagine," he says, "these same words read by the Dalai Lama. The meaning would be very different. Not '*this* versus *that*,"'and not 'everything is meaningless'. Rather: 'Live fully, whatever time it is. Be present to what is.'"

This is how Marcus Borg sees things in Ecclesiastes. 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 (the vapour, the mist, the fog of life) simply points us to the futility of grasping at mystery. "We cannot lay hold of that which is insubstantial or ephemeral."

OK, but that still leaves one great 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! For Ecclesiastes, death is not to be seen in that cartoon-esque way. Rather, death is present in life as a constant reminder of how idiotic we can be in our petty grasping after the ephemeral. And more than this, death stands in the background of life, as a teacher 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.*

And so, Ecclesiastes presents a very positive lesson and gives us a very life-affirming message. We are to live strongly, not tentatively. We are to live fully, not holding back. Grasping is futile, and yes, death is inevitable, but Ecclesiastes seeks to drive us, to challenge us, to shepherd us into the present, so that we can "seize the day" in a good way; in a right way. "Don't miss it; don't let it slip by unnoticed; don't live it in the fog; don't waste it chasing the wind."

The Book of Ecclesiastes looks long and hard at the realities of human experience. This is a "subversive wisdom", which totally undermines that collective "common sense" which would undoubtedly have us believe that good always wins and bad always loses.

So, in conclusion then, just open up your Bible and take a look at Ecclesiastes for yourself. Perhaps you will glimpse that subversive wisdom of which Marcus Borg speaks. Maybe you will see that alternative view of the world; that other way which takes us beyond the expected and the conventional.

For this road of wisdom is the road less travelled. And perhaps it is the road of God's true wisdom, waiting there for us to step out upon it in trust and in hope. Amen.

Praying for others

Almighty God,
we come to you today in confidence, for this world in which we live is your world,
brought into being through your love for all your people.
And as we bring all our concerns before you, we know that you are waiting to hear us and to respond to us.

Make this church a place of generosity, we pray,
where people work together, giving all that they are for your Gospel of peace.
so that the world might see your glory, and rejoice at your amazing grace.

Lord, make us your willing servants in this world.
Show us how best to approach the trials and tribulations of our neighbours.
And guide us in the best ways of shedding your light in the darkness of life.

Help each one of us to be like Jesus:
caring, sharing, and letting your divine love shine forth.

We pray today for people who wander through life, constantly seeking a purpose.
We remember especially those who store up wealth for themselves believing that the road to happiness is through the accumulation of possessions.
Help them to find in you, love, acceptance, and wholeness,
and to find freedom from material concerns.

And what we pray for others, Lord, we pray for ourselves.
May we take seriously your call to us to be servants, not masters.
Help us to value simple living and to go wherever you lead us in our lives.

In the Name of Jesus Christ our Lord we pray. AMEN.

Weekly Updates ...

"Sing @ 6.30": Gladsmuir Parish Church's next evening service will take place on Sunday 20th August at 6.30pm. This will offer a great opportunity to join in praising God with wonderful songs from the Church Hymnary (CH4), glorious harmonies and two excellent organs (and two excellent organists!). All are welcome. Admission free, with a retiring offering to benefit Christian Aid.

Prayer and contemplation: Tuesdays from 2-3pm in the Longniddry Church sanctuary. Peace, quiet and space in which to reflect in the presence of God.

New Age Kurling: Tuesdays from 2-4pm in Room 3, Longniddry Church. This is for anyone who might like to exercise their mind and body while making new friends. All ages and levels of physical ability most welcome.

Wednesday Club: Wednesdays from 2.30-4pm in Room 3, Longniddry Church. Come along and enjoy a variety of activities, entertainment, chat and tea/coffee. (Contact Janet 07766574123)

Sporting Memories Group: Thursdays from10.30am – 12 noon in Room 3, Longniddry Church. Come along, listen and share sporting memories with other older sports fans.

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