

A time for everything – Ecclesiastes 3: 1-14

Is anyone else glad that 2020 has finally ended? Do you feel a sense of relief that we do not have to live that year over again? Or are you grieving the many things that did not happen according to plan – things that were taken out of your hands – out of everyone's control as holidays were cancelled, parties and anniversaries postponed, hopes dashed, painful memories of goodbyes unlike any we had previously known?

This year we have just left behind has produced scars in all our lives. Some will heal more quickly than others. Some will have long lasting effects. Some will never disappear completely and others will influence the future in ways we had never imagined.

For everyone who has suffered because of the crisis and uncertainty of 2020, who is still suffering in this uncertain and fearful situation then this reading is for you.

The passage from Ecclesiastes, at first glance, seems quite chaotic, even fatalistic. Although written in beautiful poetic language that trips off the tongue in all its familiarity, we have a depiction of the bare threads hanging from our world. These verses reveal the stark reality of a world full of contrasts, and lives that are equally made up of contrasting situations.

The reader would be forgiven for thinking that seen in isolation this well known passage in Ecclesiastes offers no hope in a world and a life where we have no real control over what befalls us and we can relate to this in a much more intimate way than before.

When we began last year we had absolutely no comprehension of what awaited us. And a good thing too. How could we possibly have contemplated the pain and the disruption and the loss and the challenge we each had to overcome? We could never have imagined a time of not being able to meet safely in church and share refreshments and hugs. A time when our busy bustling outreaching church

would have empty halls and quiet car parks. Yet, we, along with countless other churches have survived, have continued to be a light and a witness and a comfort and a support through the faithfulness and compassionate caring of you the members of this part of the body of Christ. But it has not been easy.

We have become tired, disillusioned – how much longer is this going to last? We see little glimmers of hope only to have them dashed as another lockdown comes into place and infection rates rise and hospital services are unable to cope with the demand. At times we feel yes we can get through this – and we most certainly will – but there are also times when we might feel like giving up – lulled into a sense of believing what's the use – nothing we do makes any difference.

And exactly into this situation we hear the words of Ecclesiastes – there is a time for everything. There has to be a time for tearing down as well as building up. With joy there must also be a time for sorrow. Pulling up can be just as

important at times as planting. There cannot be mending without tearing nor peace without war. We are not created to live in one constant state – we have been created not to be simple passive spectators but to be active participants taking hold of situations, adapting when needed, changing when required. We are not helpless and we are not being asked to sit passively until this storm abates – we are to face up to the challenges and find a way through.

And I know that sounds much easier said than done. It is difficult to find a way through when you are heartbroken. When you have suffered great loss, when you are despairing of ever being able to lift your head again. And maybe for a time it is OK to feel like that – Ecclesiastes reminds us there is indeed a time for everything. But that time for nurturing pain, clinging to the hurt, harbouring grudges cannot and should not last forever – this time too has to pass and in its stead we will find freedom and liberation and lightness. Pain and hurt and grudges are very heavy burdens to carry.

And again that is easier said than done so maybe we need to step back as we begin a new year. Seek to look at things with fresh eyes, new perspectives, revitalised energy.

One of the best analogies of this will be known well by the many talented crafters within our congregation. Every week since lockdown began in March, we have witnessed their skill and creativity in the resurrection quilt and the lectern cover and more recently the Christmas Story banner. Each woman stitched her own little part of the project. Confident that their contribution would be needed and make a difference.

Alone the pieces made very little sense but crafted together by the person with the overall vision – a complete masterpiece was produced. And it became for each one of us a sign of hope. The idea for the resurrection cross was conceived and completed before the pandemic struck – it was supposed to be unveiled on Easter Sunday morning but instead it was to become the backdrop to all our YouTube services as we learned how to be church in a different way for a different time. The fingerprints left on the stitches of

that quilt have become part of the fabric of our church story during this season. And no-one who sat with needle and thread, faithfully completing their tasks had any idea of how important the finished article would become. A symbol of hope, a reminder that death and destruction and cruelty and injustice was never going to have the last word, that even when the evidence looked scant, God was still, is still holding us in His hands.

But there are times, and this past year has been one of them, when it is only the close-up picture that we see, and we get bogged down in all the conflicting details and challenges. Sometimes life seems out of control, but God comes to centre us again with the assurance that all time, and our time, are in his hands. Hope is in God's handling of things, in his ultimate plans and in the light that shines in Jesus.

In the midst of the complex and tangled threads that all too often make up our lives, what is God saying? What might He be encouraging us to consider as we seek to be a Light for our time in our own communities? He is not asking us to understand the full plan, doesn't expect us to see the final

vision He has ordained for His church but He does expect us to be faithful, to do the small parts with hope and grace and love assured these small parts are vital to the finished creation. So as we prepare to enter into another period of uncertainty and restriction He seeks to prepare us with nourishment. This meal is His gift to us through His Son. So we can take and eat and drink and know His strength will see us through this time until we can meet once more around His table.

And in His time we will know God truly has made His home with us. In time he will wipe every tear from every eye and in time there will be no more death or grief or crying or pain for the old things have passed.

And now is the time when God Himself graciously invites us to come.

Heavenly Father – we do believe all times are in your hand and so we simply ask for the strength and grace to continue

doing the little works you have called us into in the wisdom
of the Holy Spirit and the love of Jesus Christ our Saviour and
Lord. AMEN.