

Ecclesiastes 3  
The Terrific Truth about Time  
*Tim Anderson 22/10/17*

In 1965, The Byrds sang,  
"To everything, turn, turn, turn.  
There is a season, turn, turn, turn.  
And a time to every purpose under heaven.  
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."  
It's amazing really.  
It went to number 1 on the US charts.  
And the song is basically verbatim quoted from the Bible.  
The only bits they added themselves were the repeated 'Turn, turn, turn'  
and the line at the end of the song  
where they have just sung,  
"A time for peace."  
And they say,  
"I swear it's not too late."  
In other words right now is the time for peace.  
Let's grab hold of it.  
Of course in 1965, it was the height of the Vietnam War.  
People were really hankering for peace.

And it's not just the Byrds.  
This passage of Scripture is appreciated by many folk.  
I've been asked to preach on it at a number of funerals.  
Now it's not a passage I routinely suggest to families.  
I would always suggest a passage about the resurrection to eternal life.  
That's what I want to be talking about at a funeral.  
So every time I've been asked to preach on Ecclesiastes 3,  
it was the family's own idea.  
And there have been a few times,  
one just recently.

So what resonates about this passage?

Well I think it rings true to our experience of life.  
The poem goes through a pile of things and their opposites.  
And it says there is a time for both of them.  
A time to be born, and a time to die.  
Well that much is self evident.  
You wouldn't be here if you hadn't been born.  
And unless Jesus comes back first,  
one day you are going to die.  
But the poem also pairs things together.  
"A time to be born, and a time to die."  
That's talking about people.  
"A time to plant and a time to uproot."  
That's almost an equivalent thing for a plant.  
"A time to kill and a time to heal."  
That's talking about people.  
"A time to tear down and a time to build."  
That's a very similar thing for a building.  
When our Op Shop had been burned,  
it was a time to tear down.  
Soon it will be time to build.  
And I think that people resonate with this experience of life.  
It's true, isn't it?  
That at various season of life  
there are different activities that are in the foreground.  
There was a season in life when I changed lots of nappies.  
I don't do that anymore.  
When you are in the middle of changing lots of nappies,  
it can feel like it's going to go on forever.  
So it's quite good to hear from Solomon,  
that there are seasons for things.

When Solomon says that there is a time for all these things,  
He's not saying that they are necessarily good.  
"A time to weep and a time to laugh,

a time to mourn and a time to dance."

If you are weeping,  
it's not a good thing that you're weeping.  
But if your loved one has died.  
Then that's the right time to weep.  
It's a tragedy that your loved one has died.  
But if that's your situation,  
then don't make it worse by giving yourself a hard time about weeping.  
After a death, then it is a time to weep.

In the story of the Bible,  
you can find times  
when it was time for all of the things Solomon mentions.  
A time to plant is in spring.  
A time to uproot is when there are weeds.  
A time to kill, somewhat controversially,  
when God's people took possession of the promised land.  
A time to heal, when Jesus healed the sick.  
A time to tear down, when there are idols,  
a time to build, when Nehemiah rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem.  
A time to dance  
when King David danced in front of the ark of the covenant.  
A time to embrace when you get married.  
A time to refrain from embracing when someone has leprosy.  
A time to tear, like Job who tore his robes after the death of his children.  
And a time to sew, like the wife of Proverbs 31.  
A time to be silent,  
like Jesus when he was on trial before the Sanhedrin.  
And a time to speak,  
like the apostle Paul on trial before Agrippa.  
There is a God appointed time for everything under heaven.

But this presents us with a bit of a problem.  
How do we know what time it is?  
Of course I can pull out my mobile phone and check the time.  
But that doesn't tell me what it's a God appointed time for.

Is this a time to search or a time to give up searching?  
How will I know?  
If I put my wallet down somewhere of course I will look for it.  
But if I don't find it, eventually I will have to give up?  
But how long should I search?

Well that's that puzzling truth that lies behind Solomon's poem.  
It's easy to see that there's a right time for many activities,  
and a time that wouldn't be right for many activities.  
But often it's hard to know what it's time for right now.  
On our Parish Council at the moment,  
we are struggling with the problem of knowing what time it is.  
Is it time to take the easy road,  
and get the insurers to rebuild what we had before the fire?  
Or is it time to take the hard road,  
and take responsibility for rebuilding ourselves,  
and build something better yet more expensive?  
What time is it?  
It calls for wisdom and insight.  
And when it comes to practical questions  
good and godly people with the gospel at heart  
can disagree about what time it is.  
So what are we to do with this poem?

The explanation of the poem is in verses 9-15.  
These verses are not nearly so well known.  
But they give you a godward perspective on things.  
Did you notice that the poem doesn't mention God at all?  
It just talks about life.  
But in the verses that follow,  
God is mentioned 8 times.  
And these verses are a key to understanding what to do with the poem.  
Verses 9-11 remind us of the beautiful truth of God's sovereignty.  
Solomon says,  
"What do workers gain from all their toil?"  
The implied answer is not much.

Even if you can buy a house in Toorak,  
you won't necessarily have happy relationships  
with the other people who live in the house with you.  
So we don't want to find all our meaning and significance in work.  
There is a time for it.

But there is a time for many other important priorities too.  
Solomon has seen the burden that God has laid on the human race.  
I take it that he's still talking about work.

It is a burden.

But it's also a burden being able to think reflectively  
about how to operate in the world.

Some days I think it would be easy to be a bird.

You fly around looking for a worm to eat,  
and trying not to get eaten by a hawk.

And if you find food and stay alive,  
you don't have anything else to worry about.

But for us, there is plenty to worry about.

Is it a time to tear down or a time to build?

Is it a time to embrace or a time to refrain from embracing?

These are tricky questions that can keep you up at night.

An animal just has to worry about the present.

But God has set eternity in the human heart.

We are concerned not just with our immediate survival,  
but with a relationship with our creator.

Right across cultures, right across human history,  
people have tried various ways of connecting with their creator.

None of the animals do that.

But it is hard wired in us.

God has set eternity in the human heart.

But here is the burden.

"Yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end."

We have this yearning to connect with God.

But actually we can't understand what God is doing in history.

Many people use the image of a tapestry.

If you look at the back of a tapestry,

all you can see is a lot of knots and loose threads.  
That's what we can see of God's plans.  
Everything looks confusing.  
We don't know why he does what he does.  
We don't know why things don't get run the way we would run them.  
But if you look at the other side of the tapestry,  
there is a beautiful picture.  
God is actually weaving things together  
to make history his perfect picture.  
The only problem is -  
we don't get to look at the picture till we get to be with Jesus in heaven.  
Some days we might get a glimpse at a little bit of God's picture.  
You might see how some particular struggle you were going through  
actually served to advance God's kingdom.  
But for the most part,  
we don't get to understand the full picture.

Well what do we do with that?  
The key is to know that there is a beautiful picture  
on the other side of the tapestry.  
I don't need to know what the picture is.  
I'm looking forward to seeing when I get to heaven.  
But until then, it's enough for me to know,  
that God is in control of history.  
God's sovereignty is a beautiful truth.  
How does it help me day to day?

When something happens,  
it lets us approach it in a positive way.  
Suppose I have to spend 4 days in boring meetings.  
I could get all uptight about it.  
What is God doing?  
Why can't he fix his church so synod isn't so deathly boring?  
But if I know that God is sovereign,  
then I know that God has a purpose for synod.  
And he has a purpose for me being at synod.

I might not know what the purpose is.  
But I can just relax and make the best of it that I can.  
And it can be quite helpful to wonder what God's purpose might be.  
Is he trying to train me in patience?  
Are there people at synod he wants me to talk to?  
I can't look at events and read off God's purposes.  
It is a common mistake to think we can have access to the mind of God  
about all of the little details.  
But just knowing that he does have a purpose  
and mulling what that purpose might be,  
well that can be a helpful exercise.

Why did God allow the Op Shop to burn down?  
He had a purpose.  
Nothing happens for no reason  
because God is sovereign over the universe.  
We can't know for sure what his purpose was.  
But even mulling about his purpose  
can help us to approach the situation with different eyes.  
It stops us thinking it was the random act of a troubled person,  
something with no rhyme or reason,  
and starts us thinking that God is working out his purposes.

We don't know the ins and outs of God's purposes.  
Jesus said, "It is not for you to know times or seasons  
that the Father has fixed by his own authority."  
The book of Deuteronomy tells us,  
"The secret things belong to the Lord our God,  
but the things that are revealed belong to us and our children forever."  
There is a season for every activity under heaven.  
And though we have limited understanding  
aside from where Scripture has revealed God's plans to us,  
We can rejoice because God's plans are comprehensive and perfect.

How does Solomon put it?  
If verses 9-11 remind us of the beautiful truth of God's sovereignty,

Verses 12-13 tell us  
that God's sovereignty drives us to happiness and holiness.  
In verse 12.

"I know that there is nothing better for people  
than to be happy and do good while they live."

If God is in control of every season of our lives,  
and if we can't see the picture side of the tapestry,  
what should we do?

Relax and be happy.

It goes against the grain of our modern world.

We'd like to be in control of everything.

But actually there is great freedom in accepting that God is in control.

He's the one who's making the tapestry.

So we can breathe a big sigh of relief.

Someone else is looking after things.

Someone else who is infinitely more capable than we are.

So relax and enjoy whatever season he has put in front of you.

And do good.

Sometimes worrying about the consequences  
makes it hard to do the right thing.

If I follow God's way here,

I might lose my job.

I might lose a friend.

It also operates for the church at a corporate level.

If we follow God's way,

then we might lose our position of influence in the community.

Don't worry about those things.

Be happy and do the right thing.

Let God weave the tapestry.

Leave that up to him.

Just be happy and do good.

Finally this morning,

God's sovereignty drives us to fear him.

This is verses 14-15.

I know that everything God does will endure forever.



Nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it.  
God does it so people will fear him.  
There is a time for everything,  
and a season for every purpose under heaven.  
A time for this and a time for that.  
And what are we to learn?  
That God is sovereign over time,  
and so we should fear him.  
Now fear is not about trembling in your boots.  
We mustn't picture God as someone who wishes to harm us.  
But fear is a trembling trust.  
It means stand in awe of God.  
Revere God.  
Honour God.  
Obey God.  
And God's relationship with time should convince us to fear him.

You and I, we are a blip on eternity.  
We are here one day and gone tomorrow.  
Our best laid plans might last for a few years.  
I planted some fruit trees this week.  
If God is kind and things go well,  
they might be still bearing fruit in 30 years.  
Maybe.  
And most of my plans will definitely not last that long.  
But God's plans endure forever.  
The tapestry he makes will not fall apart,  
and moths will not eat the fabric.

God's plans can't be changed.  
If he wants something to happen,  
it will happen.  
As he says through the prophet Isaiah,  
"I am God. There is no other;  
I am God. There is none like me.  
I make known the end from the beginning,

from ancient times, what is still to come.  
I say, "My purpose will stand,  
and I will do all that I please.""

How do we respond to such a great God?  
With humility.  
When you are driving on an outback road.  
We did a bit of that over the school holidays.  
When you are driving on an outback road,  
you sometimes meet a road train.  
Massive long trucks with at least three sections.  
If you don't like exactly the way they drive,  
you don't stop to argue with them.  
You treat them with healthy respect.

Now there's something slightly disrespectful  
about comparing God to a road train.  
But get the point.  
God is infinitely more powerful than a road train.  
So you treat him with respect.

Solomon says,  
"God does it so people will fear him."  
It's right and proper that we stand in awe of God,  
that we revere God,  
that we honour God,  
that we obey God.  
And it's a wonderful kindness to us,  
that God helps us to do those things.  
If Solomon has helped us to have an appreciation  
that God is Lord of time,  
then he has done us a great service too.

Verses 9-11 remind us of the beautiful truth of God's sovereignty.  
There is a tapestry.  
You might not be able to see the picture side yet.

But it is there.

God is Lord over time.

Verses 12-13 tell us

that God's sovereignty drives us to happiness and holiness.

If God is Lord over time,

then relax and enjoy life,

and live to please him as best you can.

Verses 14-15 tell us that God's sovereignty drives us to fear him.

Have respect for the one whose plans endure forever.