

**SERMON – 4/1/26****'It's Time'****Ecclesiastes 3:1-24****John 1:9-18**

'God has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.' (Eccl.3:11)

How many times have you looked at the time this past week? If you are anything like me it's the first thing you do in the morning. If you have appointments to keep you probably keep checking your watch. Maybe you have a clock in your living room or your kitchen or your workplace. If you use a computer or a mobile phone the clock is always there and there's a clock in the car or on the bus. There's a clock looking down on me from the balcony here in the church and a big bell in the tower behind me chiming the hours. Most of us were probably keeping more than an eye on the time on Wednesday night and perhaps even counting down the seconds to the start of the new year. All over the world crowds gathered, bells chimed and firework displays filled the air. We are obsessed with timekeeping, perhaps more than ever we have been – where once I might have said it's about five to eleven, I'm more likely now to check my phone and tell you it's 10.53. How many times have you checked the time this past week?

I don't often cut things out of the newspaper because I know the cuttings will just end up cluttering the place or else will just get lost. But I remember as a teenager cutting out a little poem from the *Sunday Post* which made me stop and think. I'm not quite sure why it made such an impact on me or why I bothered to keep it but I remember tucking it into my wallet all those years ago and it occasionally comes to my mind. I remember finding it still in my wallet 25 years later and I noted it down before it disintegrated. It went like this: 'He hadn't time to pen a note... He hadn't time to cast a vote... He hadn't time to sing a song... He hadn't time to right a wrong... He hadn't time to love or

give... He hadn't time to really live... But now his time will have to end... He died today, my 'busy' friend...'

How many of us are too busy to live? We watch the clock but we have no real appreciation of the ebb and flow of the seasons. We have labour-saving devices of every imaginable kind, things that those of previous generations could not even have dreamed of, and yet what do we do with all the extra time we have? Far from being more relaxed and able to benefit from a less rigorous lifestyle, many people today are routinely exhausted, stressed-out, and too tired to enjoy the good things of life.

This morning we read probably the most famous verses from the Book of Ecclesiastes, a very gentle rhythmic passage which takes us away from a blind slavery to the clock to recognise that time waxes and wanes in a much less frenetic (and a much less predictable) way than the relentless ticking of a clock often drives us to think.

"There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens:

a time to be born and a time to die,  
a time to plant and a time to uproot,  
a time to kill and a time to heal,  
a time to tear down and a time to build,  
a time to weep and a time to laugh,  
a time to mourn and a time to dance..." and so on.

You could, I suppose, read these words as a description of the tyranny of time and the tyrant dictator God who stands behind it, directing His minions here and there at a whim, but they have never read like that to me. Rather they are a celebration of the variety and diversity of life through which all of us travel, never knowing from one day to the next what surprises may await us round the next corner, a realistic recognition that there is never unmitigated happiness in human experience but equally that despite the terrible things that sometimes happen, life is not an unstoppable series of calamities either.

From the outset we are reminded that we are not masters of our own destiny – there is a time to be born and a time to die, and in neither of them do we have any choice – but we are also given to

think about the variety that the giving and taking away of life brings to our experience. There is a time to plant and a time to uproot, and those who work the land find such fulfilment in both seedtime and harvest. There is a time to build and a time to destroy – a look round at the architecture of our environment tells a picture of constant change – there comes a time to take life away from something that has outlived its usefulness so that new opportunities may be taken. How would it be if there was never anything new, if we just reconstructed what needed to be repaired exactly as it had been before? There is time to laugh and time to weep, each activity appropriate in its time, each a necessary part of our physical and emotional make-up, each a foil to the other. There is time to embrace and time to refrain – sometimes we desperately need another human being to touch, to hug, to be there for us, even just to talk to, and sometimes we just need to be on our own, to retreat, to be silent. There is a time to keep and a time to throw away, as my own experience of that newspaper cutting nicely illustrates – we can't keep everything (although some people have a jolly good try, and hold on idolatrously to material possessions as if the world would end if they let them go) but equally we can't live only for the moment either – the throwaway society doesn't last either! There is much on which to ponder in these words, and you could do a lot worse than living with them over the coming days.

But as well as being pleasing poetry, these words give us permission to get off the tramlines for a bit and reflect on the changing seasons of life, the fact that there is no bland uniformity about living. Between birth and death, however long or short a time that may be, one person may experience everything from serene happiness to terrible tragedy, everything from deep love to crushing loneliness, everything from laughter and dancing to mourning and tears. For some, certainly, there may be more of one thing than of another, but none of us who are laughing can be assured that it will always be so and none of us who are weeping are condemned to a lifetime of tears. There is both challenge and comfort in that, of course – the challenge to avoid the complacency and sense of self-sufficiency that may come when all is going well, but also the comfort that comes from recognising that even though things may be tough at the

moment, it is not a foregone conclusion that the rest of life will be empty, and how important it is to share that reassurance with someone who feels the darkness threatening to enfold them. There is a time for everything, and we need to be prepared to move on with God, ebbing and flowing with the seasons, benefiting from the lessons that each experience brings us whether or not it is pleasant at the time, and trusting that there is a deeper meaning in what we are going through in the purposes of God.

What the rest of the Book of Ecclesiastes is known for is its repeated and rather depressing refrains: "Meaningless, meaningless," says the Teacher; "There's nothing new under the sun," Life is "a chasing after the wind." But this chapter is different. Here the writer can echo the Psalmist: "I trust in you, O Lord, I say you are my God. My times are in your hands." (Psalm 31:15) "What do workers gain from their toil? He asks. I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end." (Eccl.3:10-11)

In the midst of all this talk about life on earth, life that is dominated by the passing of time, a sunbeam bursts forth from heaven illuminating the thought that, far from directing things from on high like a tyrant, our God is intimately involved with His people, sharing in the very heart of our joys and our sorrows, and making His presence known – God with us – at whatever point we are experiencing life's highs and lows.

It is precisely what we have just been celebrating at Christmas – that the eternal and life-giving Word of God became a human being and came among us: "Tears and smiles like us He knew; and He feels for all our sadness and He shares in all our gladness." (From *Once in royal David's city*)

Right here, deep within each one of us there is a connexion with eternity, liberating us from the constraints of time and opening the way for an experience of God which transforms life from the mere beating of our heart and electrical impulses in the brain to a

relationship with the Most High, the Creator of the universe. How utterly amazing is that!

Augustine famously prayed: 'You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.' C.S. Lewis wrote: 'God made us; invented us as a person invents an engine. A car is made to run on petrol, and it would not run properly on anything else. Now God designed the human machine to run on Himself. He is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on.'

It is neither in planting nor uprooting, neither in killing nor healing, neither in tearing down nor in building, neither in weeping nor laughing nor any of the other things positive or negative, enjoyable or depressing that our fulfilment is to be found, but in God. What's more, it is not left to us to reach up to heaven to find Him – in Jesus Christ He has broken out of eternity into time, to fill that aching, eternal void that lies at the heart of each one of us so that we might be whole.

"Everything God does will endure for ever," we're told. "Nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it." (v.14) What God does through Jesus Christ when a person is born of God and invites the Holy Spirit to take up residence in their life is to fill the eternal space in their heart and to connect the believer with Abba Father, and there is nothing that needs to be added to that and nothing that can be taken from it. Unfathomable though it may be, God does it and we revere Him for it, for whatever the circumstances of our life may be and for how long we will never again be alone because in Jesus, Immanuel, God is with us.

"The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God." (John 1:9-13)

In those words from Galatians with which I began the service this morning, "When the time was right God sent His Son" (Gal.4:4)

and when the time is right, the opportunity is there for any one of us to experience the transformation of all things that happens when the Holy Child of Bethlehem is born in us and the eternity within us is filled.

Take your eyes off the clock this year. Step off the treadmill. If you have not yet entered into life in all its fulness in Christ, let this be the moment. It's time.