

Ecclesiastes 3:1-14
“Yesterday”

I’m getting to that stage of life where the old Lennon and McCartney song

Overhead: when I’m 64

Is starting to get uncomfortably close. Actually, it’s quite encouraging that a goodly number of you folks out there have reached that exalted age and just sailed serenely past. But that’s a nicely jaunty, jolly tune. That will do for a specific day in another year. But today, Remembrance Sunday 2020, I’m thinking about a rather different Beatles song. Much less bouncy. Rather wistful, verging into distinctly sad.

Overhead: Yesterday

It is apparently the most performed pop song of all time, with over 3000 recordings made, including even one by

Overhead: Mr Bean

And you thought his musical limitations were just one finger at the

Overhead: 2012 Olympics ceremony

The words and the music just seem to complement each other so perfectly. But I was amazed to find a report that they didn’t just emerge together. McCartney supposedly dreamt the tune, and had to quickly get to a piano when he woke up, to cement it in his memory. But the words came later.

There were some substitute lyrics, though, just used to develop the arrangement of the tune, and these are so ridiculous that I hope I just haven’t fallen for an internet spoof here:

Overhead: scrambled eggs

*Oh my baby, how I love your legs,
But not as much as I like scrambled eggs ...*

Well, the words fit ... but I can’t see *that* song making it to the top of any pop chart.

So I think we stick with the better-known, official words for this morning.

*Yesterday
All my troubles seemed so far away
Now it looks as though they’re here to stay
Oh, I believe in yesterday*

But it's not just generally sad. There's something specific alluded to

*Why she had to go, I don't know, she wouldn't say
I said something wrong, now I long for yesterday*

And although that's always struck me as likely referring to some relationship break-up ...

*Yesterday
Love was such an easy game to play*

But there's also the possibility that Paul McCartney was originally thinking in terms of the death of his mother when he was quite a bit younger, and that false guilt feeling of was *he* to blame in some way?

In fact, that's one thing that can always afflict us, to some extent, come Remembrance Sunday, a kind of "survivor guilt". We think back and remember those people who are no longer here. And it's possible that, no matter how absurd it might be, those "what if's" rise up to torment us. Or even a "why them?" ... but, implication, *why not me?*

And those word from *Yesterday* chime in so accurately and tellingly:

*Suddenly
I'm not half the man I used to be
There's a shadow hangin' over me
Oh, yesterday came suddenly*

This year, especially, we feel the force of that *Suddenly*. Suddenly things are just unrecognisable. People are wearing face coverings in the shops! We're doing church like this! One of the strange memories that will likely stick in my mind was how, right back at the start of that original, full-on lockdown, you could just walk across that junction at the top of

Overhead: East Hill

And not have to worry about cars. In fact, you might even have to wait until one came along. I wonder what kind of memories 2020 will evoke in decades to come, when, hopefully, Coronavirus has subsided to nothing more than - and probably just seen as a facet of - the annual flu season.

But that word *season* is an important one for us to grasp. Times and seasons. For we are creatures of time. And there's a hymn that puts it

Here for a season, Then above

And I remember a couple of lines from something we were taught in Year 7 or 8 Music, a piece called

Overhead: The Insect World

Contrasting the life of insects that is usually so very short, we were also taught that

*Seventy summers, when they're gone
Will appear as short as one*

So the *whole* of our lives as one single, protracted season, can also be a fair - though fairly chilling - way to look at it.

So let me point you back to that strangely comforting, yet also strangely disturbing section from the book of Ecclesiastes we read together earlier on. I don't think we need to see this as morbid, but just serious, and insightful, and helpful.

Just look at that big opening claim here

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

(Ecclesiastes 3:1)

I think we could do with seeing this as the first big point to take home from this passage today:

Overhead: every aspect of our lives is included

When it comes to this God we're talking about here.

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

(Ecclesiastes 3:1)

Folks, it really is important to get our heads around this. We have a God who really is in charge of this world.

For I know that the LORD is great, and that our Lord is above all gods. Whatever the LORD pleases, he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps.

(Psalms 135:5-6)

Now that would be seriously scary, if we were not convinced that God is totally good. That's the whole problem with the kind of deities that human beings make for themselves. They're really just over-powered humans, with all the faults as well as all the powers increased. So if you got on the wrong side of the

Overhead: Greek / Roman "gods"

Then *watch out!* They can be mean and vindictive in ways that ordinary mortals can't. And mythology is full of humans coming to grisly ends because they annoyed one of them.

But come to the NT, and you'll see a wonderfully warming application of that every thought:

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

(Romans 8:28)

Every one of those various seasons and times fall under the control of your heavenly Father. And so we mustn't think too simplistically of this world as being merely a battlefield between God and Satan, as if they were equal and opposite, or even near-equals and opposite.

So when things seem to be going wrong in your life, don't take it that somehow "the Devil" is somehow fighting more strongly today, and that the forces of heaven are having to give ground, even if, don't worry, they will rally again later and reclaim that lost ground. That is a false picture.

But we may need to alter our picture not just of "spiritual warfare", however you understand that, but of God himself, too. He is not simply the God of the nice and the comfortable.

Even the "bad" things too

You've got that right at the start of this list of contrasts

... a time to be born, and a time to die; ...

(Ecclesiastes 3:2)

And some of those contrasts are just reflective of the seasons passing, just what we see as the natural rhythms of life

... a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; ...

(Ecclesiastes 3:2)

Some of the contrasts are just different, and we wouldn't say there's one better than the other *in general*, just the timeliness which can make one more appropriate *now* and the opposite at another time

... a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; ...

(Ecclesiastes 3:7)

But some things, clearly, that we would say are always undesirable, but sometimes necessary

... a time for war, and a time for peace.

(Ecclesiastes 3:8)

So in this world there will be

Overhead: weddings and

Overhead: funerals

There will be

Overhead: successes and

Overhead: failures

I still feel vaguely guilty that when our Jo missed out by just one point on the A-level grades she needed for her first-choice university place, it was the chemistry that let her down, despite all my efforts ...

... and yet it was at the second-choice place, with all the trauma of getting her there with just three weeks notice, and the stresses of settling into that distant place so far from home (but fortunately with a caring Gospel church there to provide the day-by-day and week-by-week support that we couldn't) ... yes, it was there that she met the lad who was to become her husband.

And so there will be times when Covid-19 will turn the world upside down, and a time will come when that will be just a footnote to history, just like the previous ravages of influenza 100 years back, or the immeasurably worse awfulness of the Black Death in the Middle Ages. That is how this fallen world currently is. But it is a fallen world which *God* still claims as his own. And over which he reigns for the benefit of his own:

*Since all that I meet
Shall work for my good,
The bitter is sweet,
The medicine, food;*

So successes *and* failures, good times *and* bad, can *both* be the ways that God shows his far greater goodness to his people. He doesn't excuse us the difficulties. But his presence - and the resurrection of Jesus - transforms those difficulties. So, facing the biggest bad of all,

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

(1 Thessalonians 4:13-14)

It's also worth pointing out, isn't it, that no matter what kinds of disappointments or travesties we might face, Jesus has been through similar or worse.

And yet it is not just that God claims the extremes of our lives for himself.

And everything in between

There's just routine stuff, too

a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; ... a time to keep, and a time to cast away; ...

(Ecclesiastes 3:5,6)

But notice: seasons only

In that passage that we read, time for this, time for that ... there is that implication that they are just "seasons".

There are times when we may hope for good health, but there are times when we must also expect less good health.

There are some things that we would expect to behave like the seasons of weather, around and around. Others like the fluctuations of the stock market, with far from totally predictable ups and downs. And other seasons - like Shakespeare's ages of man, will have a generally predictable order, almost a threatening inevitability.

So, whichever of these may be most noticeable to *you* in your life today,

Prepare for change

Don't think that things will just stay the same indefinitely. In your home. In your body. In the nation. Certainly **in the USA**. But in your church, too.

And how that grabs you may well depend on the kind of person you are. For some people, change is invigorating. For others, it's more like devastating. But for all of us, it's

Overhead: Coming, ready or not! as the seasons come and go.

Some of us will be stretched. Some of us will be stressed. Whichever ...

Prepare to be uncomfortable

Remember that old song

This world is not my home

I'm just a-passing through

Well, that's right. Or, as the Bible puts it,

For here we have no lasting city, ...

(Hebrews 13:14)

We talk about

Overhead: vagrants

having “no fixed abode” ... but we are *all* vagrants, in that sense. We may *talk* about a “permanent address”, but the nearest thing we get to that in this world is six feet beneath a tombstone. We *don't* stay. We *don't* belong. And deep down, inside, we know we're made for something else, somewhere else, where there *will* finally be stability.

Down here, it's the treadmill of over and over.

What gain has the worker from his toil? I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.

(Ecclesiastes 3:9-10)

Yes, there are good times, of course.

He has made everything beautiful in its time.

(Ecclesiastes 3:11)

But those times are limited. Make the most of them while you can.

I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil — this is God's gift to man.

(Ecclesiastes 3:12-13)

But there is still something missing from this world.

Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

(Ecclesiastes 3:11)

There is an ache and a longing for the reality of which this is just a shadow.

I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him.

(Ecclesiastes 3:14)

And actually that is where our longing needs to be directed. Not to

Overhead: title, but something more like a tomorrow.

For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.

(Hebrews 13:14)

Like Abraham, the writer of that book tells us, a couple of chapters earlier, Abraham who left his prosperous home and became a nomad living in tents, but

For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

(Hebrews 11:10)

And it's a place beyond the seasons of this life, to judge by the Bible's description of it. Notice it is harvest every month!

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

(Revelation 22:1-2)

Folks, I don't know the details of your Yesterday. But I can promise you that kind of Tomorrow, if you will accept, in closing, this morning, a rather different take on Remembrance. The last words of a justly condemned criminal, perhaps even less worthy than us of the grace of God, but all of us totally equal in our total need of it.

With no human hope left ...

And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

(Luke 23:42)

Will you just look *back* longingly at the Yesterdays you will never recapture, or look forward, upward, *hope*-ward, to Jesus Christ, ...

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

(Hebrews 13:8)

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