

## Reflection for Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> November: Homemade Faith 'Everything in its time' (Eccles 3:1-15)

A time for everything, and everything in its time. Although the words of this iconic passage might initially feel like an unusual way to wrap up our major series on 'Homemade Faith', I really felt as I was preparing for this Sunday that *this was where we had to land*. I hope in the next few minutes to explain why.

We live in strange times. To us they feel unprecedented, although anyone who watched the recent TV series on the great plague of 1665 over the last few weeks will have had a sobering reminder that dangerous pandemics have been an occasional feature of human society for as long as humans have been around.

Nevertheless, that's not to lessen the impact on those of us – probably most of us – who are experiencing this as something new. And times of crisis force us to see life through new lenses. What is this time? What does it mean for us?

Each of you will have your own answer to that question. For some, this time has forced permanent changes. For others, it has led to life-changing decisions about what really matters in the time we have left on this earth. For others still, the honest answer to those questions is: 'I don't know what this all means.'

And I want to affirm that last answer. For the best part of 400 years Western culture has swallowed the myth of human omniscience. The idea that everything can be knowable. That we are in charge of our destiny. That the world can be tamed and brought entirely under our control. We're no longer allowed to say that accidents just happen. There has to be a reason, there has to be a cause and a culprit, someone who has to take the blame.

Years like these blow our pretensions to power and control out of the window entirely. A tiny organism, which we can't even see, has brought the hubris of our culture crashing down, and the unsustainability of our lifestyle into pin-sharp relief.

And we find ourselves turning back to the scriptures and looking for answers. I think the ancient wisdom of the writer of Ecclesiastes has something to teach us. It unmask the vanity of our pretensions and reminds us of the true nature of our humanity. **There is a time for everything and everything in its time**. But we can't always understand the bigger picture, nor should we. God is God and we are not. Uniquely special, yes; uniquely loved, certainly; but we are still finite beings with finite capacities. Eternity is in our hearts but not yet in our understanding.

To truly hear the words of the teacher is to restore our humility and surrender the myth of our control back to the Almighty once again. And let's briefly listen to 3 timeless truths again today:

First, the teacher reminds us that we have **to live with mystery**. We cannot fathom the depths of divine wisdom. Things happen in the world that we can't explain. Perhaps in time we will grasp some of the answer – but we may not. To live with mystery is not to idolise ignorance but to embrace humility. To surrender control to God and to trust that whatever happens, the Lord is God and the Lord is good, as Psalm 100 puts it.

Seasons of crisis inevitably call those truths into question. There will always be those who demand that God should intervene – or to put it another way, that God should take away our freedom in order to fix a big problem; though it's interesting that it's often those same people who complain most loudly when the higher power of the government takes away their freedom in the current season precisely to fix the same problem. Which is not a comment on lockdowns, but it does beg the question: is that the kind of God we really want?

Hard as it is, the better path to follow, according to the teacher – the true path of wisdom – is the one of humility, and acceptance that life has mysteries we cannot fathom, which is why God is God and we are not. May God grant us grace to live with mystery.

Secondly, **we live simply.** One very obvious lesson of the pandemic is that our Western lives are impossibly complicated, and reliant on a huge web of local and global structures to maintain them. And it's also been very noticeable that for many of us, the best way to navigate the pressures of the current season has been to go back to basics: a simple daily routine, intentional time with family in whatever way we can manage that, a short walk outside to appreciate the beauty of nature if we can.

This wisdom is nothing new. Listen to the teacher more than 2,000 years ago: 'I know there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. That each of them may eat and drink and find satisfaction in all their toil – this is the gift of God.'

Get the essentials of life right: work well and do good, enjoy good food and drink – live simply and leave the rest to God.

Over the last 3 months we've explored lots of ways to practise our faith at home, to adjust to the demands of the current season. Although we've all been lifted by the promise of a vaccine, the reality is that we've still got a season ahead of us to navigate. And the wisdom of the teacher remains as valuable as ever. May God grant us grace to live simply, with humility and gratitude, day-by-day.

One final word – **a time for everything, and everything in its time.** It was pointed out to me this week that the words of v5 – 'a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing' – have new resonance for us. Who'd ever thought there would be a time to refrain from embracing?

There is nothing new under the sun – 'whatever is has already been, and what will be has been before.' (v15) And so we each of us sit in our homes today, watching and worshipping, as people before their Creator. As people have done for thousands of years.

We may be doing it in new ways, thanks to technology – but we worship the same God with the same human lips and lives. We are still us. And God is still God. He doesn't change, and what he does endures forever. May God grant us grace, day-by-day, to fathom his eternity in our hearts. Amen.