

MARKING TIME

Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

The poem of seven couplets entitled 'A Time for Everything' in Ecclesiastes chapter three is perhaps one of the most well-known passages in the Old Testament. Pete Seeger composed the song, 'Turn! Turn! Turn!' based on it in the late 1950's, made famous by the folk rock group the Byrds in the 60's. It is part of what is known as Wisdom Literature, the art of learning to live wisely, a healthy corrective to our frenetic work environment of Gauteng, the economic hub of the country.

So as the New Year begins, it's an opportunity to take stock. Shopkeepers and audit clerks take stock. They count and tally to counter 'stock shrinkage'. That is one way to look at time, a commodity to be used, carefully counted and controlled.

However, that is not the way the writer of Ecclesiastes views time – a commodity invested for optimal returns. He regards time as a gift, a gift of grace to be received and treasured. We speak of killing time, waiting for a delayed train to arrive. We speak of wasting time as if it has a use by date. We glibly say time heals, when a heart has been broken and a life left in pieces. However, time by itself does no such thing. It requires a response from us, whether we grow better or bitter.

So, look with me at our passage today. Linger over its phrases, allow the couplets to capture your imagination. The writer simply recounts, without comment, the striking nature of opposites, how they attract and how they repel. It's not narrative prose telling a story. It's poetry, words used sparingly and creatively to grab our attention.

'A time to be born and a time to die', the two things in life over which we have no control. But then proponents of pregnancy termination and assisted death, euphemisms for abortion and euthanasia think otherwise.

'A time to plant and a time to uproot'. An agrarian culture of hand held implements certainly knew the reality of that. They may well be metaphors for the development of character and habits which determine our destiny.

'A time to kill and a time to heal'. My visit to the Apartheid Museum several years ago with the family still lingers in my mind when I saw the gallows, the hangman's noose and the trap door. Our history is littered with tragedy and violence. Healing of minds and bodies for many, given our past, is a slow and painful journey.

However, the poem reminds us that we are not simply victims of our history, 'God [makes] everything beautiful in its time' (v11a). Moreover, 'He has also set eternity in the human heart' (v11b). Whilst hindsight is a great teacher, eternity alone will reveal the significance of time spent on earth.

Personally, I find the last stanza of Rudyard Kipling's poem 'If' daunting.

'If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run
Yours is the earth and everything in it
And what is more – you'll be a man my son!'

Granted Kipling is using hyperbole to make a point, but this is not the biblical view of time. It's reductionist and mechanistic. It leaves no room for the rhythms of grace and Sabbath keeping.

As we enter the New Year various voices offer their take on time. Scenario planners project plans based on 'high' or 'low' road options. Political pundits pontificate whether the year will be one of patronage or principle. Stock brokers speculate about bullish or bearish markets. And on a personal level our new year resolutions frustrate and encourage in equal proportions.

So, do we simply resign ourselves to what we perceive as inevitable, over which we have little or no control? Rather we take our cue from the writer of Ecclesiastes who reminds us that our times are in God's hands. Moreover, "As your days, so shall your strength be' (Deut 33:25b).

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