

HOLY TRINITY SUNNINGDALE

Date: 31 May 2015

Reading: Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

Theme: Past, present and future

He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds ...

It is such a privilege to stand here today surrounded by friends and church family emphasising and celebrating in all this wonderful creativity that we are church and community in 2015. I am hugely grateful to all those who have made this Flower Festival possible, for their willingness to take part and make it all that it is. I know that not everyone is able to be here with us in this service today, but for them in their absence and for those who are here, can we please together show our appreciation?

And can I say thank you so very much for coming to celebrate with us this afternoon. Anniversaries are always important. Birthdays always count. Even if there is that sense of one more year and we'd really rather forget the actual number. This year 2015 sees the special anniversaries of the birth of Elvis Presley, the death of Winston Churchill, Nelson Mandela's walk to freedom, the Battle of Waterloo, the founding of the WI, the publication of the Guinness Book of Records, the first screening of Eastenders and of Fawlty Towers, the completion of the

writing of The Lord of the Rings, the introduction of Bird's Eye fish fingers, the first Eurovision Song Contest and the beginnings of a fledgling company called Cunard. This year. This anniversary year. We are in exalted company indeed.

Now 175 years is a very long time. And although people are living longer these days (my dad was 86 in April) there is no one alive now who was here at the very beginning in 1840. Well ... no human person at any rate.

Our bible reading today comes from the OT book of Ecclesiastes. So often in the bible we know who the author of the piece is – Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, one of the gospel writers; or a letter from Paul, Peter, John or James, one of the apostles. Even in the OT we know about the prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah and so many others.

With Ecclesiastes we are not quite so sure. He is called the Teacher or the Preacher and he writes some amazing poetry. A time for this and a time for that at the start of chapter 3. But he is also (from what he writes elsewhere and from how he writes it) a bit of a miserable beggar – not a theological term, but a description of one whose constant refrain is “there is nothing new under the sun”. Clearly, he hadn't heard the Swedish entry or seen the amazing sight of the Three Queens in Liverpool. He needed to get out more.

But that's not the phrase I want us to remember this afternoon. It's quite a different one and one which is much more upbeat. And it's this:

He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds ...

So when I said there was no human person alive today who was here at the start that is perfectly true. But we must never ever forget that God has been here right from the very beginning. He continues to be and he will be long into the future.

He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds ...

The Past ...

There have been some really significant people here along the way and we need today to remember and honour them. The vicars have a special board at the back of the church. Their names are there for all to read every week. But we need to be very clear that the church in any given place is so much more than a list of those who were its leaders from time to time.

We need also today to remember and honour those who have been part of HTS over the years as quiet, faithful, prayerful worshippers, as those who have given money to maintain the building and to extend the work of the kingdom, as those who have given time and energy and

creative skill and leadership; as those who may now have moved on – either they have died and gone to be with Jesus in glory; or they have moved on to another part of the country or the world to continue to serve him there.

HTS (like so many local churches) over its 175 years and in its scope and in its reach is very much bigger than we might think and much more significant than we might ever have realised. The Archbishop of York is often really brilliant, I think, at reminding us of our heritage and of our Christian rootedness. A black voice from Africa really helps us reconnect with who we really are and the part the Christian church plays in national and international life.

The Past ... and the Present ...

He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds ...

At the same time it's good to see how God deals with us, faithfully and consistently over the years of history, always with us in the present moment.

He has made everything suitable for its time

In other words whoever we are and whatever we have now (whenever now is) is just what we need. We celebrate what God has given us now not be worried about what we don't have.

As many of you know, a little team of us went out from HTS to Uganda last year. We were all really struck by so many things. One of them was the contentedness of the people with the resources God had given them. They knew what they had – which was often more than they first thought. And they did not stress or be anxious about the things they didn't have. They might pray for more, but they didn't lose sleep over the lack of more.

He has made everything suitable for its time

Whenever the present is, God is in control of what is suitable.

Of course this is very reassuring. But it's not to say – absolutely not- to say - that everything stays the same and that what was suitable in 1840 is suitable now; or what was suitable in 1900 is suitable now; or what was suitable in 2000 is suitable now; or even what was suitable in 2014 is suitable now. As many of us know, the landscape here is very different from what it was 12 months ago. There is a very different feel about things. God has been very good.

He has made everything suitable for its time.

Where we are now is exactly where we need to be.

But we don't just live in the present.

He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds ...

Into their minds ... Into our minds ... we need to honour the past. That's why (as we've already said) we need to remember with thanksgiving those who have gone before.

We have spoken about the past and the present ... But he has also put a sense of the future into our minds too. We also have a sense of the future.

The Future ...

You have heard me say many times that constant change is here to stay. This is not all there is. God has more for us and for those who come after us. Our children are the church of today just as much as we are and they are the leaders of tomorrow. We must welcome them and pray for them and encourage them. The future of the church in this country is in their hands not in ours. We may need to take some risks. We may need to let go and to let them.

Our children, if they are followers of Jesus, are the future. And some of us find that really scary. The early disciples Jesus called to follow him were probably teenagers. Starbucks in Winchester (a very big coffee shop which takes a huge amount of money each week) is being run by a group of guys in their early 20s. Our children are the future whether we like it or not. We may need to take some risks, to let go and to let them.

Culture is changing so rapidly. And culture, as you know, is best defined as “the way we do things around here”. All

kinds of things we took for granted are shifting. Authority. Respect. Commitment. Loyalty. All these things are changing in political parties, in local organisations and in the church. This also is the future. And it's a really challenging one. We will have to think about things differently. And some of us find that really scary. Our children are the future whether we like it or not. We may need to take some risks, to let go and to let them.

He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds ...

Today on this special anniversary:

- we give thanks to God for the past,
- we embrace and enjoy all he is giving us in the present in each other in the now and
- we pray like mad for the future with all its challenge, uncertainty and promise.

In the words of the song Lynne is going to sing for us (to a very well known tune) we can reflect on this past, present and future theme and offer our prayers to God quietly and in our own way.