

A time to be born and a time to die

(NB this was a baptism service at 10:30 with a large number of guests)

Over the past few weeks we've been exploring a sentence each week from an old piece of poetry in the Old Testament.

It's Ecclesiastes 3 and this week is "a time to be born and a time to die"

(NB – week by week some baby photographs were being shown for church members to guess who it was)

The photographs we had earlier were not of new born babies although John Gregory looked like he still hasn't got over the shock of being born.

Someone I met the other evening (and I shall be careful not to give the game away by looking anywhere in particular) wanted to take a video camera in and film the birth of their child. What is that all about – what's the matter with you????

My wife likes to watch the programme "One born every minute". What a boring programme it's the same every week. Three couples, three babies – big deal.

As you can tell, I don't have any fondness for the giving birth part of being a parent...its very stressful for husbands. Apparently it's a bit uncomfortable for the Mums as well.

But whether it's an early birth or bang on time or later than you expected, there's a time to be born and although He is the only one who knows it, there is a time to die.

In your book were written

all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.

¹⁷ How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!

You might think that knowing Jesus (or being a Christian) would guarantee you at minimum of the 3 score years and 10, but that wasn't the case for Lazarus.

He was Jesus friend, but he fell ill and died and the whole story suggests it was at a young age. Jesus could have made him better, but he didn't...he went and shared the suffering of Lazarus's sisters and was deeply deeply moved at the loss of his friend.

Make no mistake, God already knows the length of days each of us will be given, but should it be shorter than we hope, it's not God who decided to shorten it...the world is NOT the way God intended it to be.

Jesus does though show us what God's Kingdom will be like. He claims that he is the Resurrection and the Life and on that specific occasion demonstrated his power by raising Lazarus to life.

He went further than that though, in order that we could be forgiven and live in relationship with God the Father, Jesus allowed himself to be crucified on a cross.

Our sentence today, A time to be born and a time to die reminds us that Jesus was born in Bethlehem – we celebrated that just a few weeks ago, but he came in order to die, and we will celebrate that at Easter in just a few weeks.

A time to be born and a time to die

His death meant that we could be forgiven

His resurrection guarantees the promise of eternal life.

For those who put their trust in Jesus Christ, the length of this life isn't that important – because when the time to die comes, it simply becomes the doorway into God's presence.

So all in all, we have a great deal to thank the cross for.

And the cross is the strangest thing. Anyone who wears one is wearing an instrument of death round their neck!!

(here we followed the liturgy of signing each candidate with the sign of the cross using oil on the forehead)

Part 2.

All sorts of people have superstitions and I was hearing the other day about Don Revie – he used to manage Leeds United Football Club. Apparently one time the team coach broke down a mile from the ground so the players had to walk a mile to get there. They won the match. For the next few weeks they parked a mile from the ground and walked and kept winning, until they lost and he stopped doing it.

I showed a picture earlier of John Gregory when he was younger, here he is when he played for QPR

(NB – QPR are the team of one of the families coming for baptism. John Gregory is a former professional footballer who played for QPR and current manager of a side in the Indian League. He won the title!!).

I sent John an email out in India where his team have qualified for the playoff's and I asked if he had any superstitions when he was a player. He emailed back.

Hi Jon.. Yes I had a few superstitions when I played which were as follows... I put my left sock and left boot on first then obviously right side followed suit... The last to go on were my shorts which I held in my hands until the very last minute I would put them on as we left the dressing room... Why ? Because if I didn't follow this ritual I believed we would lose and I would have a bad game.... How stupid ????

sorry that was another one !!! I always wore my football socks inside out ... !!!

Did it once and played well so I did it for the rest of my career !!!Over 700 games

All of us can have superstitions, and not even think that it doesn't actually sit very well with Christian Faith.

My father was a life long practising Christian and a lay-preacher. You would think he didn't entertain any silly superstitions. Well!

Some salt spilled on the table and he took a pinch and threw it over his shoulder, apparently that's to ward off the devil.

He would NEVER allow an umbrella to be unfurled in the house. You could not leave your shoes the wrong way round and he was always anxious if it rained on St.Swithins day – he believed it would rain for the next 40 days.

A time to be born and a time to die

You might have a few of your own. I won't condemn you but how many people say "touch wood" and then knock on a piece of wood??

Well.....it comes from a pagan belief that evil spirits live in wood and if you are expressing a hope about something, you knock on wood to stop them hearing and interfering.

I hope no-one slips over in the snow – touch wood.

Once you know where it comes from it makes things a bit awkward.

But before you think I'm about to keep lambasting everyone about their superstitions...Christians can have them all though they are dressed up slightly differently.

On Palm Sunday we hand out palm crosses as part of the worship. The idea is to keep them at home to remind us of the Easter story, but if you're not careful they can become a bit of a lucky charm. I knew someone who kept one in the car.

Wearing a cross is understandable as a Christian, but not if you feel frightened to go out without it...which reminds me of a story of a young woman who saw friends wearing a cross on a necklace and thought she would like one too...so she went in a jewellers and asked about them and was shown various ones. She didn't like any shown her and said to the assistant, what I really want is one with a little man on it.

To her, it was just a piece of jewellery like her friends had. She didn't know who the man on the cross was, or why he was on a cross, and it probably didn't seem

bizarre she was wearing a method of execution (as we talked about earlier).

But it's the death of Jesus on the cross that changes everything for Christians. We don't need to wish for luck, or knock on wood or have any superstitions. We simply pray.

We don't need to worry about the past and our wrong doing, our sin, – we just need to ask for forgiveness.

We don't need to worry about the future, we simply trust God and place it in his hands.

After all – if the Son of God is prepared to die for us, in the hope we would turn and receive forgiveness and follow him, how much more will he do for us?

Becoming a Christian is the start of the journey and for these children today they are welcomed into the Christian family. We don't know what lies ahead for them or how many days are allotted to them, we pray they have long and richly blessed lives – but all any of us can know is today and enjoy living in the love of God today.

A time to be born and a time to die

9:00am service

Psalms 139:13-18

John 11:17-27

At first glance, a time to be born and a time to die might seem an obvious statement; but I think there is a big difference between a Christian understanding of life and death to those of ancient people or maybe even modern people.

Put in its broadest sense, pagan people believed gods controlled everything. God's had to be appeased and pleased so that they would grant favours and in some places this even went as far as child sacrifice in order to gain favour.

There was a fatalistic view of life and death. In an era of very high infant mortality, the simplest of illness was capable of taking life, plagues, war, famine and hardship, death was far more frequent than it is for us.

The end result was a belief that the gods were in charge of who lived and died and people had a fatalistic attitude.

The Psalmist – who on this occasion is David – has a greater insight and a deeper understanding of the intimacy of God's involvement in our lives. This is not a distant God who is uncaring, but an omniscient God who is permanently present in our lives. These verses are snippets from the whole of Psalm 139

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

²You know when I sit down and when I rise up;

⁵You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

⁶Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;

⁷Where can I go from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence?

⁸If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

¹³For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.

¹⁴I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

David has arrived at an understanding that is completely unprecedented. God has an intimate involvement in our lives.

When it comes to a time to be born and a time to die, David writes.

In your book were written

all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.

¹⁷How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!

God has not planned the length of our lives in an arbitrary fashion, rather, he knows the end from the beginning, he knows how long we shall live. Before we are born, he already knows every moment of our lives. No wonder David says "How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!".

It is mind-blowing, but God could not be God if he didn't know the future. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end and God does not get surprises.

Last Sunday night at film club we watched Bruce Almighty. Bruce is unhappy with God, his life is going

A time to be born and a time to die
nowhere, he cannot see the blessing he already has and
so he shouts and rails at God. In one sentence he says

“God is a mean kid sitting on an anthill with a
magnifying glass. I am the ant and he’s burning off my
feelers.

Of course in a comedy film you expect such silly lines,
but there is a deeper underlying truth. Many people feel
that somehow God is intimately involved in our lives
and is the one giving or taking away. No wonder that
people blame God for what goes wrong. When someone
loses a loved one at a young age – we fully understand
how they might be angry with God for not intervening.

My Mother lost a child at full term. A chap who led a
men’s group at my last church had lost a child to cot
death syndrome. We have either experienced first hand
or close to us the death of someone at a young age; of
course people get angry with God.

In a remarkable phone-in the other evening on the
radio, three Christians were explaining how they coped
with the loss of a loved one at an early age. One lady
put it beautifully and simply. The world is not as God
wants it to be and as it will be one day be. God mourns
for the suffering we experience.

We need look no further than the story of Lazarus.
Despite the death of her brother, Martha declares her
trust in Jesus as the Messiah. It’s like saying – I know
this hasn’t turned out the way I wanted, but you are
still Lord and Saviour. Jesus not only claims that HE is
the resurrection and the life, he demonstrates it by
raising Lazarus. In this chapter we see how deeply

moved Jesus is at the death of his friend and we read
the famous two word verse. Jesus wept.

Yet even as we mourn and pour out the lament of our
loss the bible inspires us with hope and a future. There
is a glorious passage in Isaiah 65 that paints a picture
of the future. This is just a snippet...

²⁰ ‘Never again will there be in it
an infant who lives but a few days,
or an old man who does not live out his years;
the one who dies at a hundred
will be thought a mere child;
the one who fails to reach [Ⓜ] a hundred
will be considered accursed.

There is a time to be born and a time to die and for
many the time to die is not at the end of a long life. So
how are we to live in the light of this?

The saints of old trusted themselves into God’s loving
care and had a curious view of Death. Death was seen
as a friend. I know – it takes some adjusting to.

Death is the doorway through which we will be ushered
into God’s presence in all it’s fullness. This hope, this
future, this anticipation removed any fear – death no
longer had any sting.

St. Paul says in Philippians 1v21 For to me, to live is Christ and to
die is gain

Such was the understanding of what was to come, there
was no fear. Which explains a verse from the hymn we

A time to be born and a time to die
sang All Creatures of our God and King, written by
William Henry Draper and first sung in 1919. It's based
on a poem of St. Francis called the Canticle of the Sun
which is itself based on Psalm 148

This is from St. Francis poem

Praised be You, my Lord,
through our Sister Bodily Death,
from whom no living man can escape.

Woe to those who die in mortal sin.
Blessed are those whom death will
find in Your most holy will,
for the second death shall do them no harm.

St. Francis had this habit of referring to everything as
Brother or Sister. Brother Sun, Sister Moon and so on.
Here he refers to Sister Bodily death and the blessing
that death is for those who are saved.

We are more familiar with it expressed this way

And thou most kind and gentle death
Waiting to hush our latest breath
O praise him Alleluia
Thou leadest home the child of God
And Christ our Lord the way hath trod
O praise him o praise him....

If we have this positive view of the doorway that is
death, even though we might mourn deeply for those
who pass through at a young age, it also gives us a new
perspective for today.

The saints of old focussed on the grace of God today.
They didn't live yesterday again and didn't worry
overmuch about tomorrow, but sought to glorify God

and live life to the full today. Only God knows the time
given to us, our responsibility is to make the most of
that time; to seize the day and live life in all it's
fullness.

In what way can I glorify God today?
In what way can I experience his favour?
In what way can I live life to the full?

If today is my last day, will it have been lived
worthwhile and to the glory of God.

Such an attitude means we live fully in the present
moment and if we take David's psalm to heart, do so in
the knowledge that God is fully with us.

Perhaps then the most suitable way to live is this.

Let all things their creator bless
And worship him in humbleness
O praise Him, Alleluia.
Praise praise the Father, praise the son
And praise the Spirit three in one