

New

Ecclesiastes 3:1-13; Revelation 21:1-6a

New.

That smell in a new car. The quite pleasure of putting on new clothes you've longed for. The smell of a new book when you open it up in the middle and inhale the middle pages. The fresh taste of the first rhubarb or asparagus or strawberry of the season. The first time you see a view of a city, country or seascape that you have wanted to see all your life. The smell of a new-born baby's head. Newly made beds. Newly baked bread. New music that lifts you up and transports you far, far away. New film or television programmes that are so perfect you simply don't want them to end. A new book and author whose words and imagination take you to emotions and places you'd never fully articulated before.

And a New Year. It is quite a thing to gather together on a New Year to worship God. The last one was five years ago in 2012. To open the diary of faith that is 2017 and look at pages not entirely blank but with plenty of room to put things in. Depending on your frame of mind it is either exciting or terrifying. The long blank stretches can be filled with possibility or with dread. But the newness is undeniable, and as people of faith, and even as people with doubt, we are called to step forward.

It is as if on this day God asks us to stretch out our open hands to receive the gift of time. We do not know how much time, but to each one of us here and now that gift is given. The time to reflect on our lives, where they have been and where they are heading. The time to reflect on the kind of work that we do within our lives – how we treat people well or poorly. The kind of decisions that we make and why we make them. The time to think whether this year will be a time of great or small projects, or whether it will take us all our time to stand still. The time to think of even just one thing that in this coming year we are going to change about how we behave, how we speak, how we act, how we look at things. For some that's called making resolutions, which if there are too many of them is certainly an overrated activity.

But if today, as God hands into your outstretched hand, the gift of new time; unshaped and unfashioned; unblemished and undecided, what are you going to do with it in this year of grace 2017?

The preacher who wrote the Book of Ecclesiastes tells us that time is balanced, and that within its broad embrace all things will find a place:

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven...”

With the gift of new time we know that it will balance itself out in the end. In the new time gifted to us there is time for birth and death, planting and uprooting, killing and healing, breaking down and building up, weeping and laughing, mourning and dancing, throwing away burdens and gathering them, embracing and not embracing, seeking and losing, keeping and throwing away, tearing and mending, silence and speech, loving and hating, and a time for war and a time for peace.

If there was one thing from this beautiful list, written two and a half thousand years ago in a time of social unease and disquiet, which one thing would you, with God’s new gift of time, want to apply to your life? What things need to be born or planted or healed, or built up or mended in your life? What things need to die, or be uprooted, or ended, or thrown away in your life? Do you need to laugh or to cry? Is it time to mourn or to dance? Is God’s new gift of time where you should learn to speak out or hold your tongue? Is it time to hate and declare war on the harmful things in your life and the life of the world, or is it time for love to triumph, and for peace to be found?

God’s new gift of time – poured out into your outstretched hands – what will you do with it?

And, if that isn’t enough to wonder about on this New Year’s Day, I wonder what God is planning to do with the new gift of time. God is for yesterday, today and tomorrow, God is Lord of time – but can we get any inkling of how God uses time in order that we might shape what we do with the new gift of time God gives to us.

In that trickiest of New Testament books, the Book of Revelation, after all the difficult metaphors and images and coded messages whose meaning may well be lost in time – we come to the

twenty-first chapter. We find God creating again, mirroring the poetic images of God creating at the beginning of the Bible. The story of God is about creating, from beginning to end. The story of God is summed up in that powerful statement, “Behold I make all things new.”

God is in the business of renewal. And sometimes that might be a root and branch reform; and sometimes that might be a painstaking restoration; but out of every gift of time, the one who is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, out of every gift of time something new is made.

It is a powerful, startling, radical image. It is near the heart of our faith. We can call this new thing by a name. He is Jesus.

God’s purpose is to renew, remake, restore, refurbish, reboot, re-invent every thing. In God’s new vision transformation, betterment, hope, beauty is to be the order of the day. There is to be a new heaven – what is that going to be like? There is to be a new earth – how is that going to be managed? Will it mean that God’s purpose is to bring those two images together?

There is to be a new Jerusalem – unlike the current riven, sectarian, divided, suspicious, dangerous city – this new Jerusalem – this new place where God and humanity will dwell is to be a place of beauty and grace and welcome and inclusion. Crying and pain and death will be no more. God’s tenderness in this new vision is such that God will reach out and wipe away every tear from every eye.

“Behold, I make all things new”, says God.

I don’t believe it’s going to be the whole universe all at one moment – in case you’re worried. But then again, you never know with God.

I do believe that as we gather at this beginning point of a New Year, just about released from the often challenging grip of 2016, this innovative God of ours moves amongst us. Perhaps brushing away tears, perhaps joining in a laugh, perhaps helping us build up, perhaps removing the harmful and the wasted parts of our lives, and whispers into our ear, in that intimate and kindly way God does when ideas form in our minds and an intuition steals across our hearts,

‘One more gift, in this season of Christmas; one more gift, on this New Year’s Day. I give you the gift of new time. Open your hand, open your heart, receive it.’

God’s new gift of time – poured out into your outstretched hands – what will you do with it in this New Year?

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen