

## **‘A time and a season for all things’**

As we ease into Autumn and proceed through Remembrance and in time Advent the Covid 19 pandemic does not budge from our powers of comprehension.

Many have been locked out of traditions through which they expected to give expression to births, marriages and deaths. Lips that would have wet the baby’s head have been dry. Hats and fascinators worn with a sense of celebration and joy remain boxed and the comforting embrace experienced in shared loss withheld. The foothold and hand grip with which we navigate life slipped.

They say you cannot step into the same river twice. You cannot start school on your first day a second time, you cannot graduate for the first time a second time, you cannot start your first job for a second time.

People often ask what the secret to a long life or long marriage is. Those who ask sit with the 89-year-old on the threshold of another decade and wait for wisdom to be bestowed. The laughing couple married 60 years represent something many long for. Taking pride in their family and shared memories the balloons, cards and special telegram from the Queen can often crown the day. The chorus of

happy birthday and the popping of a champagne cork has been virtually as good.

Virtually. Screens, monitors, phones and tablets, the novelty of sitting in your slippers for a business meeting or Zooming together for a weekend quiz has dried up for many. Like a slow-moving pendulum, we swung together in lockdown then slowly swung apart. The shadow of isolation grew, its tendrils, touching our life almost imperceptibly until they strangled, restrained and restricted our thoughts and life became dull. The seal has been broken on fresh technology and it now lies stale. The once beaming screen seems half lit. These memories have wilted like a scar.

The understandable call to ‘Safety first’ and ‘Save our NHS’ compromised patterns of medical treatment, self-presentation before doctors dried up, prescribed treatments stumbled. The voice of instinct for self-preservation was muffled and by some silenced.

When some have been made redundant or urged to ‘retrain’ and some have unintentionally retired early it seems trivial for some to complain about not having taken a holiday or a break. Vacation, or a longed for break, is often a time to nourish the soul. The break that comes with the weekend and a concert, a meal out, a pint or prosecco with a friend can nourish the soul. The expression on the conductor’s face and the 1<sup>st</sup> violins’ movement can stir even the most sober heart.

These elements that revive the soul seem to be trapped in a mine and few are aiding their plight. The lamp of hospitality has been fused and gone out. The romantic hope of the theatre's ghost light is flickering.

When ordained as a parish minister I was charged with the 'care of souls', to bring the ordinances and services of the Church to the people of the parish. This has been very different. The phrase, 'Lights, camera, action' seems to shape the before worship experience. Initially the energy and focus came easily. Several months into this unforeseen situation many are weary. Costs and personal energy levels have necessitated changes. But, although 'The show must go on' the analogy between worship and performance must ultimately be resisted. Worship is giving God the rightful place in our life. It is not about entertainment. Worship should not be judged on how well the minister has performed or personal taste. We should ask has the worship we offered been fit for our creator. Have the congregation gathered (ecclesia)? When we think of worship and the life of the Church it should at least teach, care, guide, evangelise and serve. All of this should be done in love and may bring hope. All are welcome.

The ache, like the ache for a lost loved one, is not for a building it is for an encounter with God. We do not, at a future date, when some sit in their pew, want to forget those still fearful, unable or unwilling to attend church as they did in the past. If virtual worship maintains

their spiritual life long may it continue. May our haste to be back in the building not sacrifice the less able.

In Autumn the mud on a well-trodden path threatens to spoil our intended journey. We feel weighed down and incumbered by the weight of it all. As the pandemic has affected people differently our response to guidance is often different. Those untouched by the virus may struggle to adhere to guidance wondering what the fuss is all about. Those in the front line may be jaded and short tempered with rule breakers. They have seen the consequences and the danger is with them every day. Those shielding easily see the danger for those attending a 'house party'. The protective cloak of youth can be thick. It may even feel safe. However, the weeping catastrophe in the death of a parent, child or friend gives rise to tears that no platitude or excuse soothes. These are the facts! Facts upon which we can become stuck and hang on paused.

The pattern of our days has changed. Some have excelled themselves in kindness, covered themselves in glory, like the 100 year old veteran Colonel Tom. Community spirit has been given life, like the neighbour who has responded to need, the rule keepers and the carers. The healing of the earth and the power of hygiene have been renewed priorities. It appears the canals in Venice have never had it so good.

As the clock was dragged back an hour at the end of October the usual debate about how helpful this is arose. More light or more dark? There was something nostalgic about the debate. There has been something nostalgic about the colouring of the autumn leaves and the overflowing rivers. The increased hours of early darkness signal winter. They help us remember the natural world changes.

It is a slow move back to what we knew before this pandemic but the longer nights, the autumn colours, the creep of winter remind us of the pattern of our days and the rhythm of the years. There is something profoundly comforting knowing that in time spring will break the surface of the once frozen earth. Summer will be trumpeted in a symphony of colour and a canopy of leaves. Where we are now is not where we will be in June 2021. There is a time and a season, and this season will change. This makes me hopeful. What we experience now will pass.

TS Eliot wrote;

*Dawn points, and another day*

*Prepares for heat and silence. Out at sea the dawn wind*

*Wrinkles and slides. I am here*

*Or there, or elsewhere. In my beginning.*

I also see power in words from TS Eliot's **Murder in the Cathedral**.  
As Thomas, in the 12 Century, moves towards martyrdom he says;

*'This is one moment.*

*But know that another*

*Shall pierce you with a sudden painful joy'*

In the bible in the book of Revelation you read these words.

Revelation Chapter 21.

*'Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,*

*"See, the home of God is among mortals.*

*He will dwell with them;*

*they will be his peoples,*

*and God himself will be with them;*

*<sup>4</sup> he will wipe every tear from their eyes.*

*Death will be no more;*

*mourning and crying and pain will be no more,*

*for the first things have passed away."*