

## A Time to Mourn and a Time to Dance

Our reading today from Ecclesiastes 3 is the reading that our first minister read in St Giles' Cathedral at the Queens memorial service.

I had given this reading to our Guild Convenor Winnie, before I even knew that the Queen's health had deteriorated.

I chose it because it is one of those passages in the Bible that stands like a mountain towering over other passages.

It describes the different seasons of life.

Harvest is a time when we move from summer to autumn and it is a time of change, when the warmth and the light begins to fade but the colours and the fruit are in abundance.

The writer of Ecclesiastes is simply known as The Philosopher. His Book is deep and intriguing.

In Chapter 3, we find a list of contrasts.

Today I want us to focus on one particular contrast, a time to mourn and a time to dance. I do that because today's service reflects those two moods, we mourn the Queen and we celebrate harvest all at the same time.

Mourning and dancing, would seem to be polar opposites! I feel today that we are doing something that celebrates both poles.

We are in a time of national mourning, and it's all because of our beloved Queen dying. Rightly we gather to mourn her loss and The Philosopher encourages us to do so, and tomorrow our nation will be in lock down as we watch the funeral service. "There is a time for mourning", he writes.

Mourning is something that we do as humans, and it is part of the grief process. There is no length to how long we should mourn, and we all mourn in different ways and at different times.

Mourning involves tears and pain, and that is an expression of our love for the one who has passed.

So, when we lose someone that we love, please take the time to mourn, and don't let people rush you too quickly through this. They may want you to return to life as they knew it, but for those who are grieving this can take time to begin to emerge through the shadow of loss.

The Queen's passing has opened up wounds for us all, for we not only feel the pain of her passing, but we also feel the pain that may be deep in our hearts and this rises to the surface. But allow them to do so, and don't compress it, let the

grief come and let it out, and if that involves a good heart wrenching cry, then do it.

Jesus said, *"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted"*.

Jesus reminds his people that when we are in this place of mourning, we are blessed. But where are the blessings in mourning? What is good about mourning?

I think Jesus would say, *when you are in this place, you are as close to God as you will ever be on earth*. God feels your pain and draws very close to you, and he puts his arm around you, and he embraces you and he holds you.

Now, often we don't see this at the time and we may not feel it, and it takes faith and trust to know that the presence of the living God is with us.

But He is and I love the poem from *Footprints* for it sums up for me what God does for us.

Reading – *Footprints*

*One night I dreamed a dream.  
As I was walking along the beach with my Lord.  
Across the dark sky flashed scenes from my life.  
For each scene, I noticed two sets of footprints in the sand,  
One belonging to me and one to my Lord.*

*After the last scene of my life flashed before me,  
I looked back at the footprints in the sand.  
I noticed that at many times along the path of my life,  
especially at the very lowest and saddest times,  
there was only one set of footprints.*

*This really troubled me, so I asked the Lord about it.  
"Lord, you said once I decided to follow you,  
You'd walk with me all the way.  
But I noticed that during the saddest and most troublesome times of my life,  
there was only one set of footprints.  
I don't understand why, when I needed You the most, You would leave me."*

*He whispered, "My precious child, I love you and will never leave you  
Never, ever, during your trials and testings.  
When you saw only one set of footprints,  
It was then that I carried you."*

Let me look at the other side of the coin.

For The Philosopher doesn't want us to remain in this state of mourning for ever. He wants us to move forward, at a pace that is appropriate for us. I think he is saying that there will be a day again that you will dance. Dancing conjures up pictures of happiness and fun.

You perhaps cannot see it now, but sometime and somewhere the dance will happen. That doesn't mean that you will forget your loved one, or betray your loved one, but somehow God will move the cloud that has been following you, and his light will shine again into your lives.

We all probably remember Roy Castle, the presenter of *Record Breakers*, who died of cancer some time ago. He was an incredible talented man – an accomplished musician and a brilliant tap dancer.

What Roy Castle is remembered for, though, is the great fight he put up against cancer. He fought the disease for a number of years and confounded doctors with his resilience and cheerfulness. Before he died he said that he did not want people to be sad at his death, and at his own request a jazz band played at his memorial service.

Roy Castle has probably had more influence on people's lives because of the way that he died, than he ever did as a successful entertainer and presenter. His courage and zest for life in the most difficult situation made him a great role model and he could truly say, *there is a time to mourn and a time to dance*.

Roy was a committed Christian and no doubt his faith played a huge role in his attitude to dying.

Many people think of God as some sort of Santa Claus in the sky, some wise old man looking down at us, sitting in white robes, on a throne.

However, the God of the Bible is nothing like that! Listen to these words from

Zephaniah 3:14-20

### **A Song of Joy**

*<sup>14</sup> Sing and shout for joy, people of Israel!*

*Rejoice with all your heart, Jerusalem!*

*<sup>15</sup> The LORD has stopped your punishment;*

*he has removed all your enemies.*

*The LORD, the king of Israel, is with you;*

*there is no reason now to be afraid.*

*<sup>16</sup> The time is coming when they will say to Jerusalem,*

*“Do not be afraid, city of Zion!*

*Do not let your hands hang limp!*  
*<sup>17</sup> The LORD your God is with you;*  
*his power gives you victory.*  
*The LORD will take delight in you,*  
*and in his love he will give you new life.<sup>[a]</sup>*  
*He will sing and be joyful over you,*

These words give us a very different picture of God. A God who loves us through all our difficulties, and when we overcome, God literally dances over us and joyfully shouts for us. “He will sing and be joyful over you!” This should encourage us and remind us that whether we are aware of it or not – God is always there for us. We are special – so special that our God (the God of the universe) – takes delight in our seemingly insignificant lives and dances and sings with joy for us.

So today we have two things going on.

Today, we have the mourning for our Queen and rightly so, and we have praise and gratitude for the Lord of the Harvest who has blessed us with so many good things.

A big part of my role as a minister over these last 30 years has been journeying with people through times of grief and mourning, and what I've always noticed that in those journeys, there is that mixture of despair and delight – what do I mean? Well, the journey of grief is a journey of highs and lows. When we dwell on our loss, then we are sad, but when we dwell on our good memories and the support and love that we get from our families, then our mood can change from despair to joy.

The Philosopher was right, there is a time to mourn and a time to dance, A time when God's providence calls us to weep and mourn, but then, on the other hand, there is a time when God calls to cheerfulness, a time to laugh and dance, and then he expects we should serve him with joyfulness and gladness of heart.

Observe, the time of mourning and weeping is put first, before that of laughter and dancing, for we must first sow in tears and then reap in joy.

So today, let us hold those two polar opposites and find God's joy and delight over us.

Amen.