

Happy New Year! It seems very appropriate that we should be meeting together for worship on this the first day of a new year.

I hope that 2017 holds great encouragement and opportunities for us all and that your hopes and aspirations for the year ahead are realised.

But, what do any of us know about 2017? – very little really.

We may have dates in the diary for holidays, family events, church events, anticipating lent and Easter celebrations, some summer sun and heat – God willing!

Today, like any other day, we live with hopes and aspirations (maybe even with New Year resolutions) but we live with little certainty as to what the future holds.

We live in the middle of things. We did not dictate or decide our beginning and we cannot know what our future will be.

The story of our origins may be documented in photographs and birth certificates but the personal knowledge of it all is hidden in our subconscious and beyond our knowing.

The same is true of our ending, our death. The time, context, nature and likely experience of it is unknown – we live in the middle of things.

The same is true of the future of this country, of Europe, of the nature and shape of international relationships in the year to come.

This reality of living in the middle of things is reflected in both our readings and I would like to take a little time to explore what both readings would say to us.

In the early part of Chapter 3 the writer of Ecclesiastes (known as the Teacher) reflects that there is a season and time for everything:

To be born, to die
To weep and to laugh
To keep and to cast away
To keep silence and a time to speak...

In verse 11 of our reading the Teacher sees that everything is beautiful in its proper time but it is not given to us to know the beginning and the ending – we live in the middle of things...

In the previous chapter (2) the Teacher has been agonising over the apparent futility of toiling and working to accumulate wealth and wisdom only to face the reality of death – it seems that all is vanity, a chasing after the wind!

But this section is not particularly negative. Here, and in other parts of the book, the Teacher argues that if, living in the middle of things, we have enough to eat and drink and work to do in which we can take pleasure and find fulfilment we should consider it a great gift for which to be thankful.

The teacher is urging a disposition of contentment and gratitude. Paul, when writing to his companion Timothy urges him to appreciate that godliness with contentment is great gain (1Tim.6:6).

The limitations to our knowledge of beginnings and endings is not necessarily a limitation to a sense of human flourishing or happiness – that is largely determined by how we chose to live.

Contentment does not negate hope and aspiration but our hopes and aspirations should be in the context of contentment and not greed.

Except, except, if we were meeting in a refugee camp in Lebanon, or a church experiencing persecution in some part of the world...

If we were a street child, orphaned and fighting for survival, if we lived on a rubbish tip and trawled through the garbage day and daily to collect plastic or metal to earn enough to eat – perhaps speaking about having enough to eat and work in which to take pleasure may seem like a cruel joke.

For some, like many of us, living in the middle of things holds the prospect of contentment for many in our world, living in the middle of things is to live in a form of hell of violence, abuse or deprivation.

Which takes me to our NT reading.

This reading too seems to me to be addressing the question of how we live in the middle of things.

The section to which our reading belongs begins back in Chapter 24 with the disciples anxious for some insider information about the future and ask Jesus ‘what will be the sign of your coming and the close of the age?’

The bottom line, says Jesus, is that ‘of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son...’.

Most of what is recorded in Matthew 24 & 25 does not deal with prophetic details of the future – instead, Jesus takes time to teach his disciples the importance of living in the middle of things as members of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus gives warnings of persecutions, betrayals, of false prophets and tells stories of fig trees, labourers in fields, wise servants, wise and foolish maidens, faithful managers...

The message is:

Be faithful even in trials and persecutions...

Be wise and discerning, don’t believe everything you hear...

Be ready and watchful like the faithful servants, the wise virgins...

When we come to Matt 25:31-46 we arrive at a decisive moment in Jesus teaching to the disciples.

We need to be careful how we read Matt 25:31-46

We can read it through the lens of Western individualism - as primarily a kind of rhetorical question – which side will you be on, the sheep or the goats? Is this a text that is about me and my destiny am I to reflect on whether I will belong to the sheep or the goats?

There is merit in asking that question – but it's not the primary intention.

We can read it as a core text setting out the ultimate realities of eternal fire or eternal life, as a proof text to affirm that hell is hot, heaven is delight – but that's not the main point of the contrast Jesus is drawing.

It seems to me that the main thrust of the passage is to portray the two ways we can chose to live while 'in the middle of things', and which way is important to God, which way manifests the values and actions of the Kingdom of God.

It is interesting that both the sheep and the goats ask the very same question – did you notice that?

The sheep say to the King in v.37 (Jesus is taking the place of the King in the story) 'when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?'

In v.44 we hear the goats, who seem incredulous that they should be judged harshly, ask the same question 'when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not minister to you?'

Here are two groups of people drawn from the different nations but living in the same world confronting the same realities, living with the same limitations 'in the middle of things' but living very differently.

One group see the refugees in the camps, the street child, orphaned and fighting for survival, those living on the rubbish tip trawling through the garbage day and daily to collect plastic or metal to earn enough to eat – and has compassion, they care.

The other group is oblivious to the condition of their fellow man, or even chose to be oblivious to the existence of those in need.

Jesus tells this story because he cares about the vulnerable and maintains the Jewish tradition that righteousness is not simply a matter of words, fine ideas and doctrines – but practice, a theme that often needs repeating as James does in his letter to the Christians of his day.

What will be the end of all things the disciples ask – give us some insight, but none is to be had for no one knows the day or the hour so worry not about beginnings and endings, concentrate on how to live well in the middle of things.

The teacher of Ecclesiastes teaches us while we live in the middle of things to consider having sufficient food and purposeful, fulfilling work as a gift, a blessing.

Throughout Matthew 24&25 Jesus teaches us that living in the middle of things we are to:

Be faithful even in trials and persecutions...

Be wise and discerning, don't believe everything you hear...

Be ready and watchful like the faithful servants, the wise virgins...

Above all

Be compassionate, caring not just for yourself but for the least and needy.

The Teacher urges contentment and Jesus prioritises compassion.

These our two words I want to take with me into 2017 and I think would be fitting for us all.

A little later in our service as we dedicate the offering we will affirm using the words of Revelation 21 that while we live in the middle of things we believe that in the goodness of God the end of all things will be made beautiful in its time

He will wipe away every tear.

Death will be no more:

Mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

For the former things will have passed away

I hope 2017 holds much that is encouraging for you

I hope that you realise your ambitions and goals

I pray that you will know joy, love, peace and fulfilment and that your hopes and aspirations are not stifled by fear or misfortune

But above all I hope that, recognising our limitations, recognising that we will continue to live in the middle of things, you and I live well throughout 2017 as people who identify ourselves as disciples of Jesus, bear the name Christian and live lives marked by contentment and compassion.