

Rock Around The Clock... (October 2018)

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By Rev Paul Graham

We're approaching the end of the year with a speed that is starting to get disconcerting. It doesn't feel that long ago that we were enjoying the sights and sounds of the summer and we're already faced with some of the big questions in life. How many more times does the lawn need mowing before it's too wet and cold? Do we go out for Bonfire Night, or do we stay indoors and watch the fireworks from the warmth and comfort of home? How many weeks (or days) will it be until we hear the first Christmas song in the shops? Do the clocks go forward or back and does this mean I get an extra hour in bed, or do I lose an hour's sleep?

Many of these questions (and others) may be answered more easily than others; some of them are answered out of necessity; some are not in our control, but at the mercy of others' whims. But in posing these questions we become aware of the passing of time and the way that the world around us shifts and changes with the seasons. The long summer evenings with light still streaming in through the windows at 10:00pm become long winter evenings with the curtains already drawn before everyone is home from their day's activities. Jumpers, cardigans and scarves are revived from their summer hibernation; coats, gloves and hats start to become essential outdoor clothing. And, unless you are a postman, shorts are put away to give a few months' respite from the sight of knobbly knees.

The world around us also marks the passing of the year. Trees shed their recently repainted leaves, becoming skeletal symbols of the ebb and flow of nature. Vegetable beds are tucked up for the winter, sturdy greens replacing the softer skins of vulnerable fruit. Flowers are given their last pruning, cut back in anticipation of spring bulbs pushing their fresh fingers up through the cold soil in the coming months. Visits to the bottom of the garden become less frequent, as do outdoor sports for fear of ruining the grass.

Key dates mark this time of year for us; some are embraced, others avoided. Harvest, Halloween, Bonfire Night and Remembrance follow hot on each others' heels, all leading towards Advent and the build-up towards Christmas and the mystery of next year. Whether it's the choral echoes of ploughed fields and scattered seeds, the sweet taste of treats (not tricks), the smell of fireworks and bonfires or the sombre silence at the War Memorial, it's a sensory smorgasbord that takes us through the darkening days.

Emotions are mixed through the autumn. The melancholy of the end of summer is tempered by the beauty and range of nature's palette on display; the respectful pause to remember those fallen in battle follow on from the delighted gasps and shrieks of crackling firework displays. Joy for one may be sadness for another.

This is the season where the first 8 verses of Ecclesiastes chapter 3 echo across the changing landscape, forming the backdrop to all that is around us. This really is a time for everything: a time to celebrate and a time to reflect; a time to be loud and a time to be quiet; a time to be together and a time to be alone. A time to participate and a time to sit apart.

And so we are invited into the dance of the season; to take our partners on the dance floor of fallen leaves and fading light. It is our privilege to choose whether to accept each invitation; it isn't our choice to stop the band or even choose the songs. We may dance to the raucous strains of fireworks, but sit out the bugler's lament. We may waltz majestically down the misty lanes strewn with conkers and choose to ignore the prancing of pretend witches. However, just as we can't stick the leaves back on the trees, we cannot change the pattern of the year; we cannot halt the proceedings even if we wanted to.

But just as the writer of Ecclesiastes recognises the inexorable nature of change, marking out life in the ticking of a clock, we are reminded that behind and within lies a power mightier than all that is around us. There is only one who scores the seasonal soundtrack that marks the world's rhythm through the years. The divine composer entwined with the world he created and sustains: its constant changing, its beginning and its end respond to the creative hands of God. This influence can be felt through the beauty, even in the ugliness, of the world around us. But God isn't just limited to the pattern of the seasons, to the four movements that make up each annual symphony.

Just as a conductor brings in instruments to the sound, dictating tempo, balance and dynamics as the orchestra performs, so too God invites those who respond to his Gospel baton to engage, enhance and involve. Love, redemption, judgement and mercy all play out in God's symphony as the divine composer is also the divine conductor. There beside the mourning, there beside the joyful; there beside the silent, there beside the noisy; there beside the one, there beside the many. Wherever there is life, there is God. Even in the midst of death, there is God. Throughout all, he is discovered and revealed through his people who are willing to join in with his dance.

This is part of the divine mystery; the loving nature of God to be involved in all that he has set in motion and to invite us to be involved. To be constant in an inconstant world; to be unchanging in an ever-changing world and to give hope that all is not lost: that's God's promise. To be involved when and where he leads: that's our privilege. It's little wonder that the writer continues with these words that will send us into this time together:

"What do workers gain from their toil? I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human hearts; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. I know that there is nothing better for people to be happy and to do good while they live. That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in their toil – this is the gift of God." (Ecclesiastes 3:9-13)