

Sanctuary First

A PLACE TO BE

New Year 2018: Holy Endings (31 Dec - 11th Feb)

It is an inescapable part of life that despite our best hopes, wishes and intentions... sometimes things just fall apart. They break down unexpectedly, permanently and irreversibly.

Lives end prematurely, relationships fracture, buildings close their doors, enterprises fold, projects wind up. Sometimes these breakdowns are shocking and painful, and at other times drawn out and wearying, and sometimes they are a joyous celebration, a bittersweet farewell to what has been.

So over the weeks we will be exploring prayerfully bringing things to an end with dignity, care and love. Rather than making New Year Resolutions to resolve to do new things, we are going to resolve to let go, to stop, to allow things to run their course, to reach 'a holy ending'.

Much pain and suffering can be caused by trying to extend things past their natural life, to refuse to let go of something that has already broken. Or by clinging on to something, which while good in its time, needs to close so that something new can happen. It can be hard to know when to let go of something and when to persist. We do not want to cut and run, abandoning plans at the first sign of trouble.

The seed must break upon the ground and die if there is to be new life (see John 12: 24). We cannot give up at every setback, accepting the inevitability of defeat, but we need to be aware of the rhythm of things. It's often natural for good things to run their course.

Breakdowns are never easy, but some are completely unavoidable, out of our hands and devastating. Our God does not stand apart when we suffer. God is with us as we sift through the pieces, the tatters, the ruins. When something has broken down completely and we are entirely out of our depth, helpless and lost, our God gives us the opportunity to give something a holy ending - to hand it over, in all its messiness and pain and guilt and doubt - to let go in love. With God's grace, we can learn to tell the story of who we are, with all the twists and turns woven into a new narrative.

“The Lord almighty grant us a quiet night and a perfect end.”

From Church of England Night Prayer (Compline)

Date	Subtheme	Readings	Notes
31 Dec	Calling time	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Isaiah 61:10-11 2. Psalm 148 3. Galatians 4:4-7 4. Luke 2:22-40 5. Ecclesiastes 3:1-13 6. Psalm 8 7. Revelation 21:1-6 	<p>God's perspective of time is different to our own. It can be hard for us to think about time as we are in a sense 'inside time' and God is 'outside of time'. It is often tempting to cling tightly to good things, aware always that time is running out. We ignore the cracks and fraying edges, determined that we have to hold on tight - but as well as calling us 'to' things, God calls us 'from' things.</p> <p>In the Japanese practice of <i>Kintsugi</i>, cracks and breakages in pottery are fixed with gold - so that rather than obscuring the break - it is treated as part of the artwork itself - telling you something of the story of an object. The breakage has made something new and more beautiful.</p> <p>We may have broken plates in our lives that we are trying to bodge together with glue, when instead we need to step back hand them over to God. If we let God hold the broken and unresolved things, we can relax our grip, allow God to treat it with care and dignity, celebrating the good and making room for the new.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Looking at the metaphor in verse 11 of God being like a gardener - consider a gardener's perspective on time and the cycles of nature. 2. God's universal glory - God is the ultimate creator - somehow above the cycles of weather systems and nature, the passage of time, the minutiae of our politics and the entire cosmos, and yet God enters into our time and deeply cares about our lives. How do we get our heads around that? 3. What is meant by the 'fullness of time' in verse 4? What role does timing have in our lives? 4. Consider the wisdom and patience of Simeon and Anna who both lived in anticipation of God's timing. 5. Thinking about the natural ebb and flow of what could be described as 'the rhythm of life. Praying for wisdom to know the seasons of things. 6. In the context of the whole universe it is amazing that a great ageless God is invested in our lives and gives us responsibilities. This majesty seeking to partner with us is an invitation to think bigger and let go of petty things. 7. As well as clinging to things that makes us feel happy and safe, we sometimes cling to things that hurt us and gnaw at us - perhaps out of habit, out of familiarity and out of fear of the alternative. Our identity can become bundled up in the pain. But God has a plan for us in this vision where our tears will be wiped away, where we can leave this suffering behind.

Date	Subtheme	Readings	Notes
7 Jan	Timeline	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Genesis 1:1-5 2. Psalm 29 3. Mark 1:4-11 4. Acts 19:1-7 5. Isaiah 60:1-6 6. Psalm 72:1-7 7. Psalm 72: 10-14 	<p>We are time bound creatures, living a life that is rhythmic, not static. Our lives are full of rising and falling, from waking and sleeping, from breathing in, to breathing out. Change and fluctuation is a natural part of life.</p> <p>In order to move on we have to accept that sometimes we have to leave things behind, that plans made with the best of intentions can fail, that regardless of fault or blame we have to let go. We have to allow closure.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The opening of Genesis is full of repetition and rhythm - starting with day into night, light into dark - a fundamental aspect of life is the push and pull between dark and light, sleep and wakefulness. 2. This psalm is a compelling description of God's immense power coupled with a desperate cry for help. We should not be so intimidated by God that we don't cry for help. 3. Symbolism of water. As well as being an essential component of life - water is itself alive and is constantly changing and moving - to keep fresh it has to be cared for. If it becomes stuck or contaminated it becomes stagnant and can biologically die. 4. The act of baptism, or affirming your baptism, is a positive choice, a decision to draw a line in your own story, perhaps to redirect or reorient yourself. It marks the end of one chapter and the start of another. 5. A vision of restoration, old systems and dynamics being replaced with newer ones. We see a bringing together of family relationships, civic relationships, international relationships, our ecological relationship with the earth. Restoration requires letting go of what was. 6. Consider the agricultural metaphor in verse 6. How can we prepare the ground in anticipation of the rain? Farmers have to respond to the weather and respond quickly. 7. The blood of the weak and the needy, of the oppressed, the victims of violence - is precious. Established systems of oppression are not inevitable or inescapable. How do we challenge harmful systems that oppress others and challenge our own complicity in them? We need to realise where we fit into the story and act.

Date	Subtheme	Readings	Notes
14 Jan	Being self aware and God aware	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 1 Samuel 3:1-10 2. Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18 3. 1 Corinthians 6:12-19 4. John 1:43-51 5. John 15:9-17 6. Ephesians 1:4-7 7. 2 Corinthians 5:17 	<p>God calls you as you are. Not as you will be, not as you once were - but just as you are - reading this right here and now. You don't have to prove anything. But that doesn't mean you're stuck the way you are. You're not static and with Jesus' help you can grow into a new identity that is still you, that is in fact, a fuller realisation of who you really are.</p> <p>In this confidence we can start new adventures and let go of old things.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. God calls us as we are, sometimes in unexpected ways. 2. God knows us better than we know ourselves, we can trust that we are known, that we are understood. 3. Stopping doing things, perhaps giving up addictive habits, that end up with us losing a part of ourselves - the things that make us feel like we are losing our identity. 4. 'Calling' often begins with an unexpected knowing - God knows us and so we can move forward with God. 5. We are chosen - God has chosen you, wants to be friends with you - what makes you <i>you</i> matters to God. 6. It takes trust to be able to let go of something. In the trust of the call and redemption of God we can learn to let go - to loosen our grip. 7. You are a new creation - the old creation has passed away. You can let go of parts of who you are - not deny them or hide them, just gently let them go, give them a holy ending and move on.

Date	Subtheme	Readings	Notes
21 Jan	The end of the beginning - trusting there is something more	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Jonah 3:1-5 2. Psalm 62: 5-12 3. Psalm 71: 20 4. Mark 1:14-20 5. John 12:24 6. Psalm 147:3 7. Isaiah 61:1-8 	<p>Life contains many difficult moments of trauma or catastrophe when there is a sudden rupture. Out of nowhere a relationship, or a home, or a life, is suddenly broken.</p> <p>We need to get better about helping one another through these difficulties. We need to get better at talking about divorce, redundancy, eviction, betrayal, abuse, life changing injuries, post traumatic stress and bankruptcy.</p> <p>There are no easy answers in these situations but, as let down and as hurt as we feel, we are never excluded from God. Our God does not turn away from us or abandon us. Learning to trust God and others is hard but it's often the first step in rebuilding our lives.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Hearing difficult news from reluctant messengers can be a wakeup call - giving us a new perspective. 2. When we face opposition and uncertainty – when it seems as though others are against us or out to get us - handing our concerns over to God's care rather than holding on to them tightly ourselves can offer some respite. 3. Reflecting on the deep aching emotion spoken about in the phrase “from the depths of the earth you will again bring me up.” 4. Leaving security, family, vocation behind - Simon, Andrew, James, and John are giving up profitable careers to do something new and precarious. 5. Sometimes one thing has to come to an end in order for many others to happen. 6. Considering grief and bereavement and our incredible creator God who tenderly binds up our wounds. 7. Sometimes when all is hopeless all we can do is trust God, trust that there will be justice, there will be mercy, there will be grace.

Date	Subtheme	Readings	Notes
28 Jan	Broken idols	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I Corinthians 8:1-13 2. Deuteronomy 18:15-20 3. Psalm 111 4. Mark 1:21-28 5. Ecclesiastes 7:8-10 6. Matthew 6:25-33 7. Isaiah 40:8 	<p>We live in the most interconnected time in human history with air travel and satellites shrinking distances between us and yet when it comes to crossing the gulf emotionally we are chronically unable to talk about death, ageing, and loneliness. We have made idols out of youth, beauty and wealth and they are fickle idols.</p> <p>We often struggle to talk about endings. We are often encouraged to start new things but we are not good at handling expiry and closure. We do not let our elected officials honestly confront us with the finely tuned balancing act of organising, and caring for, a complex society. Most of us want to pay less and get more, be looked after but not face up to the difficult realities.</p> <p>We pressure our leaders into thinking short term, providing a quick fix, launching a new scheme that, if it crashes and burns, we humiliate them for. We need to get better at letting go and allowing others to let things go with dignity.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sometimes we need to stop doing things - not because they are bad in themselves but because they have a negative impact on others - we are all connected, our actions have consequences. 2. Who are the prophets in today's society? Those who are willing to articulate inconvenient truths. 3. Unpacking the expression - "Fear of the Lord." It's not fear in a cowering sense, we are not to be 'afraid' of God but it is a way of talking about respecting God - being in awe - appreciating God for who God is. Which may be an unsettling experience if we have got used to thinking of ourselves as the centre of the universe. 4. Bringing evil to an end. 5. In public life we often value pride over patience. Bringing something to a good end is better than being swept up by something flimsy and new. 6. It is important to consider our lives, to think carefully about what we might need to stop or let go of - but we can also get hung up on this. We are not called to be obsessive puritans, it's about finding a healthy way of living with one another. 7. Trusting in the timelessness of God rather than idolising things that will fade.

Date	Subtheme	Readings	Notes
4 Feb	When things end	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Isaiah 40:28-31 2. Psalm 147:1-11, 20c 3. I Corinthians 9:16-23 4. Mark 1:29-39 5. Ecclesiastes 3:5-7 6. I Thessalonians 4:13-18 7. Ephesians 4:31-32 	<p>God is with us in the midst of our ending. We are not abandoned when the going gets tough, when we feel overdrawn and isolated. Much great art - visual, literary and musical - has centred around humanity coming to terms with loss, catastrophe, and tragedy.</p> <p>Often there are no easy answers but we are blessed by a God who cares deeply, and experiences with us our pain and suffering. God wants us to live well, age well and die well, with confidence and joy. With God we can slowly learn to let go of the things that hurt us and give them a holy ending - allowing us to separate the good from the bad, acknowledging the positives that came out of dark situations. Processing what happened honestly but gently in a way that gives us a new lease of life.</p> <p>Personal journals, public obituaries, and poetry (both published and private) - can offer us a way of celebrating the good and giving things a holy ending.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. God does not give up on us. 2. The broken hearted, the wounded, the desperate - are not ignored, disregarded, forgotten. 3. The Gospel invites us on an adventure, it may well be an unpredictable adventure and so we have to be willing to learn to adapt and change. 4. Healing often takes place in the Gospels as a way of restoring relationships between people - a way of bringing in the excluded and isolated to join in communal life. We have attitudes that we need to heal so we stop excluding others. 5. Thinking about the creative process. In creativity knowing when to stop can be as important, if not more important, than knowing where to start. Art is often about knowing when to put down the pen, the brush, the chisel knowing when 'to sew and when to tear'. We must pray for the wisdom to give creative work a holy ending. 6. We are not without hope. 7. Letting go of being petty, judgemental and holding grudges is something we have to continually relearn - both as individuals and communities. Let's begin the process of giving the resentment we feel towards others a holy ending. We can still be honest, we can still fight for justice, and challenge oppression, but we can give the bitterness and vindictiveness a holy ending to stop the additional pain we cause ourselves and others. God grant us holy endings.