

Turn, turn, turn

by Maggie Mitchell

The Byrds released a song in 1965 entitled *Turn! Turn! Turn!* written almost a decade earlier by Pete Seeger, a song-writer known for his protest songs.

In turn, he lifted his lyrics, almost word for word, from a short book in the Old Testament—Ecclesiastes. This book is squeezed between the better-known book of Proverbs and the somewhat raunchy Song of Solomon. They are known as the Wisdom Books. Traditionally all three books are claimed to be written by King Solomon who lived about 1000 years BC.

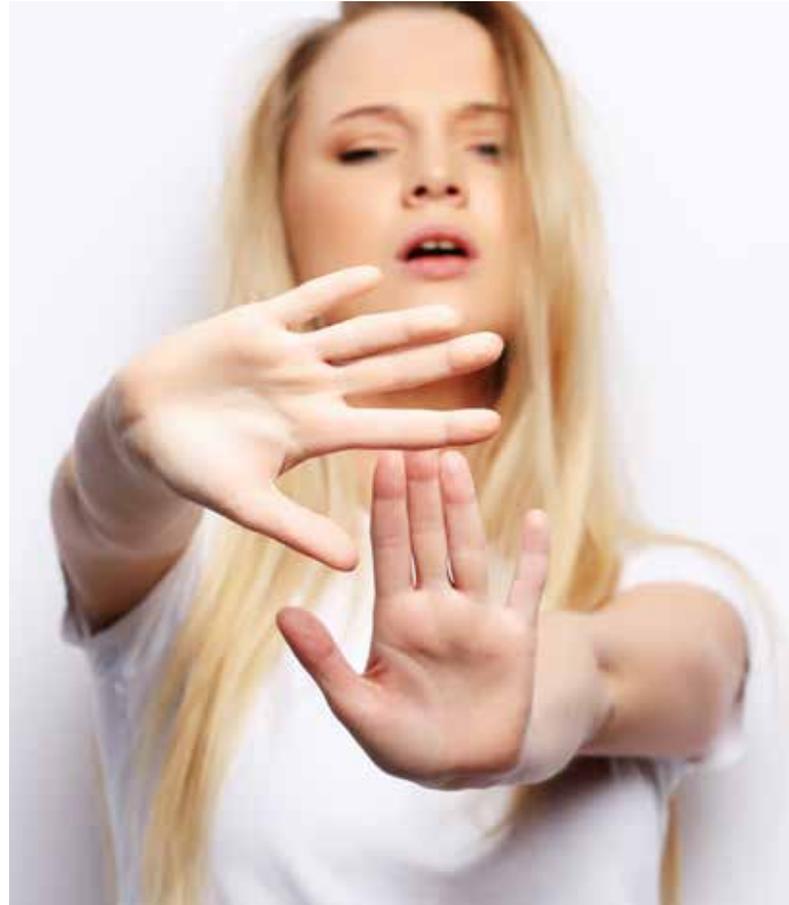
These words, from the first thirteen verses of chapter three of Ecclesiastes, were read at a funeral I recently attended. As with all funerals taking place at this time, it was “socially distanced”. Nine of us were scattered around a crematorium chapel that normally would have accommodated over one hundred people. Although I knew the words from this passage, they rang more clearly than ever before as I sat alone. When Pete Seeger wrote his song, he was mindful of the huge problems facing the world over 60 years ago. In a 2006 interview about the song he said: “This world has to stick together”. It was the only way he saw it as surviving. But as I heard the words, they seemed to have been written for this very moment we are living through.

We cannot turn our backs on the line: “A time to be born, and a time to die”. This has for ever been the case, but it is thrown into harsher perspective as we read the statistics on worldwide deaths from COVID-19. And many of those deaths could be seen as out of time. But in the middle of this rampant

pandemic, new life is happening. Children are being born. So that takes us to verse four: “a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance”.

The fifth verse hit home with its immediacy—“A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing”. It could have been a line from a 2021 Government paper advising us on limiting the spread of this virus. We are withholding from embracing so many people that we long to hug. In doing so we have come to realise just how frequently we did—without thinking. We truly have to “withhold” ourselves and look forward to when it is “a time to embrace”, and we can enjoy that warmth of human contact.

Verse seven admonishes that there is “a time to keep silence, and a time to speak”. Our all-pervasive media often magnify the voices of those who speak words of hatred or anger. Twitter, at its worst, has become a platform for shouting, but during the 2006 interview Pete Seeger made the comment: “We have to lower our voice. How can we say what needs to be said...without making ‘them’ so angry they will walk out?”



“... a time to refrain from embracing.”

This centuries-old passage of poetry remains wisdom for our time. It acknowledges the faulty wisdom that leads to hate, war, killing, weeping, and mourning, but juxtaposes each of these against the more hopeful evidence of birth, healing, laughter, love, and peace. To this Pete Seeger added the simple words of the chorus: “Turn! Turn! Turn!”

It demonstrates a message of hope: that as the seasons turn, so our world will turn to better times. This time, this season, is outlined in the last book of the Bible. In Revelation the “time to weep” is over when we are told: “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes...the former things are passed away.”