

THE SEASONS

Carlops Parish Church Eco-Service, 2016

NOTES

1. *Hymns are Church Hymnary, Fourth edition (CH4) unless indicated otherwise*
2. *At Carlops, the service included four pieces of music, each about two minutes long, and each expressing the mood and character of one of the seasons. The Carlops organist composed these pieces especially for this service; they are not available in printed form. Churches using this seasons service might either ask their organist to compose or choose four pieces of music, or omit these musical interludes – the service stands well without them.*

WELCOME

Welcome to church and to this eco-service about the seasons of the year.

Hymn 149 Let all creation dance ...

We think and speak about four seasons – winter, spring, summer and autumn – but they are really all one cycle, one entity. Each season is different, but they're interdependent. Each one stems from its predecessor. Each one has its own role. Each one generates its successor. They are all part of a single cycle of life; one repeating loop. No one season can exist without all the others.

This integrated cycle of the seasons mirrors the stages of human life. Winter, spring, summer and autumn are reflected in embryo, youth, prime and maturity. And it's that integrated cycle of the seasons and its parallel with human life that we're going to explore.

For each season, we'll think about its main characteristics and its role in the life-cycle of the natural world and of human beings. And we'll see what each season – and each stage of human life – enables and encourages and requires us to do.

For each season also, we will sing a hymn or listen to a reading, and we will hear a piece of music that expresses its character and mood. Our organist has chosen these four pieces of music especially for this service.

Prayer

God, help us to prepare for this service and its attempt to understand the cycle of the seasons and of our own lives.

Help us to think about the special joys that each season and each stage in life provides. Help us to understand how each one flows into the next and shapes it, enriches it, but still leaves it scope to build its own character, and to fulfil its own function in the whole cycle. And help us to make good use of every season, and of every stage of our lives.

Now let us all reflect privately and silently upon the wonders of the seasons and of life.

Silent reflection for twenty seconds ...

Amen

Reading Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to reap;

a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;

a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;

a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.

CHILDREN'S ADDRESS

Let's name some things that we like about each season. Let's have some suggestions ...

Winter ...

snow, Christmas, cold still days, evenings around the fire ...
others, suggested by the congregation

Spring ...

daffodils, lambs, trees in fresh green leaf, cherry blossom ...
others, suggested by the congregation

Summer ...

sunshine, holidays, warmth, strawberries, ice-cream ...
others, suggested by the congregation

Autumn ...

harvest, red-gold leaves, rich colours, apples and plums ...
others, suggested by the congregation

Quite a list! So you see, there are lots of things we like about each season. We may like some of these things better than others, but we appreciate all of them and we are happy to experience them. We may say there are some things we don't like much, but if we think hard about it, we probably wouldn't really be happy to think we'd never see them again.

They're all an important part of life. They're all things we can enjoy. And that's the real message: the seasons and life *matter*; they have so much that is good; they are there to be enjoyed.

WINTER

We start our cycle of the seasons with winter, instead of the more usual spring, for a reason.

In the cycle of the seasons, we shouldn't see winter merely as cold, dark, inert, waiting for something better. Every season contributes to life's whole cycle, so we should look beyond cold and dark to find the positive things that winter does.

Like all the seasons, winter looks forward. Like all the seasons, winter isn't just winter – it's also a preparation for the future. Winter may be hard, but always for a positive, forward-looking reason. Winter is not just a time out, but a necessary and beneficial season that helps life to survive and contributes to its burgeoning again in spring.

Winter is endurance training; it toughens and stretches us so that we can be ready for the seasons ahead. Winter is preparation, rest and recuperation. And in addition, winter combats and weakens pests and diseases that could threaten future survival.

Winter is waiting, expectancy and the womb; the forerunner and nurse of life. It is an outcome of autumn's harvest and of the love and procreation that precede the arrival of new life.

Winter depends upon the preceding bounty of autumn and what has gone before in all our lives. In winter, everything lives upon what is laid down in autumn at harvest. Winter is when these resources laid down at harvest, and experience (which is the harvest from past activity) help all creation, including us, to prepare for the renewal of life in the spring.

The wisest, most resourceful and strongest come through winter best. And their survival and continuance strengthen the whole species.

Winter uses what autumn provides and empowers spring. Live your winter to the full.

Music **Winter mood**

Hymn 234 'Tis winter now ...

SPRING

Spring derives from winter; new life and potential burst forth from the old. Spring benefits from winter and the rest that it provides. In spring, all life-forms absorb energy avidly from other re-awakening things around. Spring is a fresh start, when living things put on new clothes, clear out the dead wood, change the less desirable habits, the old and outdated ideas.

The ideas and words and phrases that we associate with spring are about energy and growth and opportunity. Here's a typical list: renewal, birth, childhood, hope, new ideas, experiment, play, trial (and error!), fresh, green, bright, building foundations, branching out, learning, developing beliefs and opinions, forming character.

All this is for one forward-looking reason: to enable a better, stronger future. Spring lays the table for the great feast and activity festival of summer – the powerful prime of life.

Just as a plant is shaped in spring for the whole year ahead, so we humans develop our ideas and characters and bodies by what we do in our youth – in our springtime. Spring affects the next three seasons. Choices made here can last for the whole life-cycle. What's done in youth, influences maturity.

Spring uses what winter provides and empowers summer. Live your spring to the full.

Music Spring mood

Reading May God's springtime surge through me, by Frances Hawley (extract)

A day in early spring –
A sort of thrill hangs in the air.
Life seems to be waiting, expectant, vibrant.
Anticipation is everywhere.
Everybody, everything, everywhere feels poised.
What will the new season hold?
Who will come?
What will happen?

... ..

Dormant seeds start to germinate.
Buds start to swell.
Snowdrops thrust through the cold earth.
And daffodils show their gold.
Ewes and cows are heavily pregnant,
Rooks build their nests in tall trees,
And small birds search for hidden nesting sites.

All of creation is hard at work to be ready in time.
So much eager energy
So much willing toil
So much necessary preparation
So much sheer excitement!

Hymn 224 The spring has come ...

SUMMER

Summer builds upon the start made in spring. It warms and nurtures seedlings – makes them into adult plants. It lets young animals feed abundantly in warmer weather; it lets them explore new activities and test themselves in friendly conditions – so they grow larger, stronger, more capable.

This is the time of achievement, of building capacity and power. Plants mature; crops ripen; animals grow to adulthood; human beings are “in their pomp”, as they say in Yorkshire – at the peak of their powers and abilities.

Summer is about vigour and strength, about being strong enough, and skilled enough, and practiced enough to build resources to ensure survival and continuance and security for the longer term. It is the peak of action and work, and an investment in a well-resourced and more secure future.

Summer is a time to fulfil potential, to be all you can be, to strive, to enjoy and use your capacity. Use your gifts; don't let them wither. Enjoy and exploit your strength and talents and capability; don't bury them in the ground, or hide them in a bank vault. Explore; do new things. Learn, then test and fine-tune that new knowledge. Well directed strength and vigour and action translate into fruitful growth and a good harvest.

And also, of course – look forward to the next season – invest in the future, because the effort put forth in summer is what defines the weight and quality of autumn's harvest.

Summer uses what spring provides and empowers autumn. Live your summer to the full.

Music Summer mood

Reading In summertime, by Paul Laurence Dunbar (extract)

Paul Lawrence Dunbar was an African-American poet, writing 1890-1905

When summer time has come, and all
The world is in the magic thrall
Of perfumed airs that lull each sense
To fits of drowsy indolence;
When skies are deepest blue above,
And flowers a-flush – then most I love
To start, while early dews are damp,
And wend my way in woodland tramp
Where forests rustle, tree on tree,
And sing their silent songs to me;
Where pathways meet and pathways part,
To walk with Nature, heart by heart.

... ..

The summer sounds and summer sights
That set a restless mind to rights
When grief and pain and raging doubt
Of men and creeds have worn it out;
The birds' song and the water's drone,
The humming bees' low monotone,
The murmur of the passing breeze,
And all the sounds akin to these,
That make a man in summer time
Feel only fit for rest and rhyme.

... ..

'Tis wealth enough of joy for me
In summer time, to simply – be!

AUTUMN

We are offering this service of the seasons near harvest time, so it is appropriate that we complete our review of the cycle with autumn – with that point in the year when traditionally, we acknowledge and celebrate the fecundity of this Earth and the bounty of life's cycle.

Autumn is the culmination of the whole cycle – for the rhythm of every year and for all of life. Autumn is when all the investment pays off, all the ships come to harbour, all the hard work comes good.

Winter's rest, spring's growth and summer's activity all bear fruit in autumn. Summer strength becomes autumn ripeness. And autumn ripeness and its harvest provide a long-term fuel store, a survival capacity to perpetuate every species. We reap and feast, and we also store for the future. We enjoy the bounty and we lay it down, invest it, for times ahead.

Prepare for the future, make plans and devise legacies. Build capacity to persist and survive. And thank God for the chance to do so. Autumn: the profit of our past and the insurance for our future.

Autumn uses what summer provides and enables life to embrace winter and the next cycle. Live your autumn to the full.

Music **Autumn mood**

Hymn 231 **For the fruits of all creation ...**

THE SEASONS AND HUMAN LIFE

As we have seen, each season is different, but they're all interdependent. No one season can exist without all the others. In that respect, the seasons are like human beings. They, and we, are part of an unending, unbroken chain of creation, activity and renewal.

No one season works alone; no one season works for itself. And at any point in the cycle of *your* life, you're not working alone, you're not working in an isolated space – you're working *from* the past, *to* the future, *with* other people.

If you are thinking that that makes life and the seasons sound complex and difficult, just pause and consider; each season only needs to care, and prepare, for its successor – and so it is with humankind.

If we want a better world, a world built on Jesus' advice to do right and love our neighbour, it's not all that difficult – if we work together.

If we work together, all that any of us needs to do is to care for *one* person – a person whom we choose ourselves – and also, care for the people who matter to that person. If everyone does that, the whole world is caring and is cared for. It's a simple image, but very powerful.

Humankind is like the seasons – unfulfilled if alone, only whole when working with others.

Live all the seasons, and live your life, to the full.

Prayer

God, we are grateful for the winter, which enables us to rest and restore and prepare for life's challenges and opportunities.

God, we are grateful for the spring, with its gifts of youth and energy, and its opportunities to make new starts.

God, we are grateful for the summer, with its activity and warmth, which help us to build strength and vigour.

God, we are grateful for the autumn, with its ripeness and maturity, and for the stores of strength and fuel it provides to secure our future.

God, we are grateful for all the seasons and their diversity – winter, spring, summer and autumn – rest, rebirth, strength and harvest – for the rewards they accord to effort, and for the cycle of life and love that they nurture.

Amen

Offering

Prayer

God, we thank you for all your gifts, in all the seasons. We thank you for our personal talents and capabilities, and for the riches of this Earth. We return this portion to your church in gratitude, and we pray that it may be used wisely in your service.

Amen

Reading Meditation XVII, by John Donne (extract, adapted)

Our last reading is a poem by John Donne. You probably know it already, but listen carefully, because some liberties have been taken with the original to suit today's theme. I like to think that John Donne would forgive; he might even approve!

No season is an island, entire of itself;
Every season is a piece of life's cycle, a part of the main;
If any season be impaired by misdeed, life is the less.
... ..

Any season's passing affects me,
Because I am involved in life's cycle.
And therefore never send to know for whom the seasons roll;
They roll for thee.

Hymn Ode to joy, by Henry van Dyke (extract) Music Ninth symphony, Choral movement, by Beethoven (extract)

Our closing hymn has been chosen for its music as well as its words. That music is not just about the seasons, but about the joy of all creation and life; it will almost certainly be familiar to you. The words are not in the hymn book, but are provided below.

Joyful, joyful, we adore thee,
God of glory, Lord of love;
Hearts unfold like flowers before thee,
Opening to the sun above.
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness,
Drive the dark of doubt away.
Giver of immortal gladness,
Fill us with the light of day!

All thy works with joy surround thee,
Earth and heaven reflect thy rays;
Stars and angels sing around thee,
Centre of unbroken praise:
Field and forest, vale and mountain,
Flowery meadow, flashing sea,
Chanting bird and flowing fountain,
Call us to rejoice in thee.

.....

Benediction

May each winter grant us healing and rest – to endure.
May each spring grant us energy and vision – to hope.
May each summer grant us strength and vigour – to strive.
May each autumn grant us spiritual riches and wisdom – to flourish.
May we live every season within the peace of God – to love and to know joy.

Sung triple amen

Music

END

Rennie McElroy
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