

Life, is cyclical.

As the Preacher Qoheleth said in the Book of Ecclesiastes – first written perhaps as long as 2500 years ago –

*What was, [will](#) be again,
what has been done, [will](#) be done again,
and there is nothing new under the sun. [\[1\]](#)*

The Church's Liturgical Year is very much like this. We move through the seasons celebrating the high feasts, solemnities and memorials of the Saints, passing from Advent to Christmastide to the uninspiringly named Ordinary Time; and then Lent is followed by Eastertide and a bigger helping of Ordinary Time that lasts through the Summer and into darkest Autumn. And then it's finished – and so of course we start all over again. There are variations, obviously. The time between Christmas and Easter changes in relation to the lunar cycles, meaning that they are nearer or further apart in any given year; and many Saints' days may be omitted because they coincide with Sundays or major feasts of the Church, which have a higher priority in the Liturgical scheme. But over all the pattern is broadly the same, and it is only the details that really change, and if we miss something one year, we can be sure it will return the next.

Sometimes this basic predictability is comforting: we haven't heard our favourite parable at Mass for a while, and we are heartened when it reappears. At other times it may seem like merest repetition: we've heard it all before (we've also heard Father's homily on the subject more than once – can't he find something original to say?). In this respect, too, the Liturgical year is very much like life, because it contains many things we want to experience again and again, and many others that have become tiresome, and which seem to give us little reassurance, or indeed, may provoke anxiety. After all, some of what Jesus says is pretty challenging – just like life. And so sometimes we long for a change. Wouldn't it be wonderful if things could be different, and we could leave behind the daily grind and the familiar and live a more exciting existence, one where our sadness at the state of our world was ended? Even if only for a while.

Half my life ago, I trained in the school of Existential Psychotherapy, a model of psychological support that was drawn predominantly from the work of Irvin Yalom, a professor at Stanford University in California. Yalom was (and still is, at the age of 90-plus) a brilliant communicator, and author of some of the most vivid books ever written about the nature of therapy and the relationship between the counsellor and their client. One of the great – great as in most memorable – moments of my life, was when in 2003, as the proud co-author of the *Which? Guide to Counselling and Therapy*, I was in Waterstones at Charing Cross looking for a textbook in the therapy department, and noted that *my book* was on the shelf at the beginning of the 'Self-Help' section; and then realised that the last book in the preceding 'Therapeutic Approaches' section was a copy of Yalom's *Love's Executioner*.[\[2\]](#) That's right. My book was next to Yalom's on a shelf in Waterstones. When I realised this, I was so delighted that I actually laughed out loud. (This no doubt led some of the patrons in the shop to think that I did indeed need therapy and so was browsing in the right department). Because there are wonderful moments in life, and days when the world is a remarkable place, and we are filled with a sense of possibility and hope and joy. But there are also days when the world is a terrible and frightening place, and we feel only pain, despair and revulsion.

What I liked about Existential therapy, and the reason I trained in it, was its central conviction that we have to find our own meaning in life – we have to uncover reasons for what we do, what we believe, and the choices that we make. However much the world and other people may try to instil ideas and behaviours within us, they remain meaningless concepts until we decide to accept them for ourselves, and come to believe in something that makes sense to us. Existential therapy teaches that we can recreate ourselves every day – that is to say, we are not prisoners of our past actions and experiences, because they can be overcome and newly understood, even if that may require a painful and time-consuming personal journey. Odd as it may sound, the therapy taught me that I had chosen to be a Christian, along with the privileges and obligations that are inherent in that – that it had not been forced upon me, but had been an offer from God to see life as He had made it, and to rely upon Him and not upon myself, an offer that I had accepted. And so my Christianity was not a burden, but a choice freely made; and it was a choice that was predicated upon the growing, and to me, all-important realisation, that it is divine forgiveness that allows us to start again whenever we need to do so, not just once but many times. We can, and often do, make the same mistakes consistently and frequently. But we can be forgiven just as often, and will be forgiven if we simply ask for forgiveness. We may be trapped in a cycle of sin and compulsive thoughts or behaviours, but alongside it is a cycle of prayer and forgiveness that is so much more powerful and enduring. Because Christianity too teaches us that we can recreate ourselves again and again, not through psychotherapy, but through grace.

And that's my point here. You may think I'm trying to sell a school of therapy to you. No, I'm really not. I'm trying to say that I saw a parallel between a therapeutic model and the faith that I had adopted, and realised where power and truth really lay – in God, not in me, and not in other people and their ideas. (Although, of course, the insights of mere human beings do often help us to see God's plan at work).

Life is indeed repetition – the same mistakes, the same successes, the same heartaches, the same moments of optimism, the same moments of despair. And so it is that we repeat the pattern of God's revelation to us throughout the Church Year. We see the struggles of the People of Israel to keep to the Covenant that God has offered them. We hear of the prophets who foretell the coming of the Messiah. We hear the poetry of praise and lament, and the wisdom of the ages that has been accumulated in Scripture. We hear also of the man who is crucified on the Cross, but who vanquishes Death and rises again, and of the community that he creates, and to which we now belong. And we understand that the man who endures the Passion is also God, and was once a baby just like us, but who came to give us hope, and the belief that things can be different, and that not just we ourselves but the World can be recreated and made as God wishes it to be.

Advent is here. Once more Hope is coming into the World. The baby will be born, and the Light will shine in the darkness, a light that the darkness cannot overcome. There may be darkness all around us now, but it will be Christmas soon, and Emmanuel, God-With-Us, will be here.

The cycle begins again. What do you hope for this time? What do you believe Jesus in our hearts and in our minds can offer to us and to the world?

And – what do you choose to believe about yourself, and about God’s creation?

[1] Ecclesiastes 1:9

[2] Irvin Yalom, *Love’s Executioner*, 1989. This a volume of short stories in which the professor writes of some of his successes and failures in clinical practice with disarming honesty, and gives the lie to the idea that the therapist always knows exactly what they’re doing.