ELAINE WAINWRIGHT interprets the well-known text Ecclesiastes 3:1-11 from an ecological perspective.

When I began my search for a Hebrew Bible/Old Testament text from the April lectionary, I discovered that in the post-Easter period, the first readings for each Sunday are all from the New Testament Acts of the Apostles. However, in the readings for Anzac Day liturgies I was given a choice of two Wisdom texts. The first was Wisdom 3:1-9, a very familiar text as it is often read at Catholic funerals: "The souls of the virtuous are in the hands of God." The second, Ecclesiastes 3:1-11, is equally or even better known: "There is a season for everything." I have chosen to focus on Ecclesiastes as it will yield rich insights.

Wisdom Tradition
The Book named Ecclesiastes (Greek), or Qoheleth (Hebrew), belongs to the Wisdom tradition in Israel’s scriptures. In it a sage reflects on life and in the particular text that is our focus, reflects on the movements or particular moments of life — birth and death (Eccl 3:2), killing and healing (Eccl 3:3) among others. The foundational life experiences highlighted by the sage mean that this text can be read anew in each new age. In this reflection we are invited to read the familiar Ecclesiastes text in light of the new ecological age in which we are living.

Significance of Time
There is a time . . . a time . . . a time . . . Time is a key element of life that grounds us ecologically. "Everything", in the words of Qoheleth, "every occupation under heaven", has a time (Eccl 3:1). Everything takes place in chronological time as the word chronos in Eccl 3:1a indicates. But when particular "moments" are highlighted, as repeatedly they are beyond Eccl 3:1a, the sage uses the designation kairos, which has the sense of "season" or "opportunity" as well as crisis — an appropriate rallying call in our present ecological crisis. The human community maps its very being in its generalities and its particularities by time.

Extending Our Vision in This Time
The ecological reader can extend the vision of the sage in Eccl 3:1 at least to the entire biotic community, to all living beings. For them too, there is a time, a season for everything, for giving birth and dying in particular (Eccl 3:2). And perhaps the words of the sage allow us to extend the "everything" of Eccl 3:1 even further to include the abiotic — the rock, sand and water to name but an "abiotic" few. We can think of these physical elements, too, as being birthed from Earth’s processes and dying or coming to an end as those same or similar processes unfold. The sage’s evocation of a season for everything is expansive and inclusive.

The way in which this evocation of times and seasons unfolds is by pairing. It would be possible to think of the pairs as opposites, setting them over against each other and evaluating them. In thinking ecologically, we are invited into the movement or the dance between the pairs, between the life processes that the sage evokes. Ecclesiastes 3:2 immerses the reader/listener in foundational movements, into life and death, planting and uprooting.

Elaine Wainwright is a biblical scholar specialising in eco-feminist interpretation and is currently writing the Wisdom Commentary on Matthew’s Gospel.
Universe Time
The universe itself was born in all its incredible complexities from a massive explosion of energy that scientists call the Big Bang. And in the unfolding of the universe, its elements — stars, for instance — die, even though their deaths may take millions of years. There is, indeed, a time to die. Birthing and dying take place on a cosmic as well as a microcosmic stage and involve all that is.

The second part of Eccl 3:2 emerges from the microcosmic — we see the life and death cycle in human agriculture. Agriculture, though, has never been exclusive to the human realm. Researchers have discovered that "several non-human species have developed farming-like relationships with organisms they've encountered" (www.bbc.com/earth/story/20150105-animals-that-grow-their-own-food). This too belongs now to the sage’s song.

A Time to Question
Ecclesiastes 3:3 invites us to reflect on violent action. We are to consider killing and its opposite — healing. There are many cycles of killing and healing in the other-than-human world as species need other species for survival. The human community is also no stranger to these processes. However, many today question our violence towards animals, for instance, which we do in order to serve our food chain. Perhaps the ecological reader/listener needs to ask a new question: Is there still a time to “kill” or are we in a cosmic moment that needs to be characterised by healing?

In Eccl 3:4 the sage focuses on the human community evoking our activities of weeping and laughing, mourning and dancing. And we can confine these to the human community. But in his TED talk Bernie Kraus introduces us to the “voice of the natural world” including a soundscape of a mourning badger whose home and family have been blown up by careless rangers. The poignancy of the badger’s cry affirms the words of the sage: “There is a time to weep or to mourn.”

The sage has listened attentively to the cycles of life, to the kairos moments in human unfolding, concluding in Eccl 3:8 with the claim that there is a time for love and hate and for war and peace. And then in the concluding verse, Eccl 3:11, affirms this right ordering of human activity; God has made everything suitable for its time, for its kairos, for its opportune time. Although the sage’s perspective is human, the reflections of the sage can be read through an ecological lens. His poem can have the cosmos and its unfolding together with all its biotic and abiotic constituents as its referents.

Our Invitation
A new invitation comes with the words of Qoheleth when we engage with our ecological perspective. We’re invited to hear the text not just as it captures the dynamic of human activities, but as it celebrates the movements and moments in a cosmic unfolding — of birth and death, uprooting and planting; of tearing and mending; of loving and hating, together with making war and making peace. During April, as — attuned to the ecological voice — we listen to the words of the sage, we will be open to transforming our consciousness to that of an Easter people who read, think and pray ecologically.