

Wheatley United Reformed Church
Sunday 1 August 2010 (Year C)
Eccles.1.1-2, 12-14; 2.18-23; Col. 3.1-11; Luke 12.13-21

Does the Bible speak with only one voice? Does it only have one tune? Maybe, if you take it as a whole: a story of divine creativity and human folly; divine love and, human ingratitude; divine self-giving and the promise of rebirth and a better world. But even that great story is played out in many ways, and some of the underlying themes sound very different. That's why I prefer to think of the Bible as a symphony, in which what we hear as a harmonious whole is made of up many strands, some of which, taken in isolation, exist in stark counterpoint to the main theme. The book of Ecclesiastes is the most striking example. This morning we have heard the voice of the man who styles himself the Preacher, probably writing in the third-century BC, and it is a world-weary, cynical, almost despairing voice which seems to suggest that all the things we work for and cherish most in human life are pointless. All is vanity and a chasing after the wind: not only the amassing of riches and power but also the seeking after wisdom and understanding. Why bother, when all that you worked to achieve may be passed on to fools who will squander it? The righteous suffer and the wicked prosper, yet in the end all perish alike. Everything repeats in an endless circle and appears to have no purpose or meaning. God's ways are too mysterious for us to fathom. So there is nothing left but to eat, drink and enjoy our work, if we can.

The word 'vanity' has a meaning close to its Latin root: it's not really about what happens when beautiful people preen in the mirror and like what they see: it means 'emptiness', 'pointlessness', 'futility'. The expression 'vanity of vanities' translates the Hebrew superlative, and means 'the height of futility'. Yet despite his pessimism and scepticism, the writer does not abandon all faith and hope. He ends his book with a simple command: 'Fear God, and keep his commandments, for that is the whole duty of everyone'. I thoroughly recommend him as a good read, but more importantly because his voice is a very modern one and rings true. That's why one of the most popular readings at funerals and memorial services comes from chapter 3, 'For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven'. If we are honest, which of us hasn't sometimes found this rather jaded view of the world chimes in with our own experience? There seems to be no progress towards that better world promised from beginning to end of the Bible; no discernible meaning or purpose to human existence; no moral order to the world. Why does God make himself so difficult to know and find? So what are these ideas doing here as part of Scripture? It's not surprising that when the Old Testament canon was being fixed some Jewish scholars argued that Ecclesiastes should be excluded, since it seemed to contradict the rest. But it found its way into the body of Wisdom literature, alongside Job and the

Psalms, and there it remains, singing a different tune from theirs: cynicism, scepticism, world-weariness, at the middle point in our Bible.

What is it that the Preacher finds so pointless? It's finding a clear answer to all the philosophical, moral and theological questions we ask. When he tells us that it's futile to think that happiness can be found by amassing riches, that's one thing. When he announces that 'Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh', those of us who work in education may justifiably feel upset: so much for writing and for libraries. The obvious response is to give up and forget all about thinking you'll ever understand or achieve anything. Yet the Preacher can never bring himself to go to that extreme. His insistence on honouring God and following the commandments seems curiously at odds with the rest. Maybe another hand added it in, as some scholars think, to make the book more palatable. Yet we know perfectly well that we do not find clear answers to the things that puzzle us most; only hints and pointers. Nor can we say why some people live long and happy lives and others have their lives cut cruelly short, whether they are good people or bad. We are frustrated by the human tendency to repeat the same mistakes over and over again; and even though we know so much more than Ecclesiastes in his time about the workings of the universe and the laws of nature, we do not seem to be any nearer to understanding why we are here or what it all adds up to.

I am glad that these troubling thoughts are present within the Bible. They may sound a dark and disturbing tune, but I think it's one we all recognise. Wealth promises freedom but brings worry and stress, while our discoveries have landed us with severe ethical dilemmas, especially as medical knowledge advances. We argue endlessly and still don't find solutions. If I stopped now, you might well wonder what kind of a godless sermon this was. We expect sermons to point a way forward, not to reach a dead end. But whatever faults you may find with the attitudes Ecclesiastes expresses, one thing stands out: he will not tolerate living a life built on illusion. We may not know the truth of things, but that does not mean we should settle for substitutes. He is relentless in stripping our illusions away and spares us no pain in doing so. And as he does so, he reveals a spiritual truth which is very much in accordance with the major themes of the Bible: that we are called to live as people who are free, not as the slaves of whim and fancy, of opinion and convention.

I am not talking about slavery as practised in times past and still in some parts of the world, or about freedom from the varieties of human wickedness which flourish all around us and exact such a bitter price on so many of our sisters and brothers. As Christian people we are called to work unconditionally for the eradication such evils. No; I mean freedom first and foremost as an inner disposition, as wise people of all ages and philosophies have acknowledged. I think of the famous if legendary

encounter one winter's day between Alexander the Great, who had conquered the known world, and the philosopher Diogenes, unkempt, living in a tub, possessing nothing. 'Ask of me anything and I will give it to you', Alexander said. 'I only want one thing', said Diogenes: 'for you to get out of the way, because you're blocking the sun which keeps me warm, and which is not in your power to give me'. Diogenes is an extreme example. But so often, without realising it, we become dependent not on God but on things: our way or life, what we own, the status we have, the pleasures we enjoy, or more negatively, resentment at the good fortune others enjoy, or anger with ourselves for having failed to achieve what we wanted.

That seems to be the case in Luke's parable of the man who amassed a huge fortune so that he could spend the rest of his life eating, drinking and merry-making is as harsh as Ecclesiastes. There's nothing inherently wrong with such pleasures, indeed, they are God's good gifts to us, to be celebrated, not denied. They are only harmful to us when they exercise such a hold on us that we assume life to be pointless without them, or that they can be substitutes for the cultivation of our inner life. Having told us the parable, Jesus moves to the lesson: be rich towards God, he says, rather than selfishly storing up treasures for yourself. Out of such richness flow all kinds of gifts: no longer under the sway of our unexamined desires, we are set free to love ourselves properly, to love others, to build new communities on the foundations laid by Jesus Christ.

In his letters Paul sometimes sounds very negative when he's dealing with how we should behave and sublimely inspiring when he tackles the great themes of the Gospel. In Colossians 3 he tells us to get rid of anger, malice and abusive language, evil desires, greed, lust and so on. When I read these lists I'm tempted to think 'Give me a break! Have I got to be *that* perfect? But he mentions them because when we live under the control of anger, desire and envy we are dragged back down into slavery. He wants us to live as free and responsible people, delighting in what is good, because we are in Christ - connected to Christ through baptism and living renewed in him. It is from that relationship that our freedom flows - and not just ours, but the freedom of every individual regardless. Society labels people and separates them into categories, and sets them against each other - another form of enslavement. Christ, and by extension his Church, if only it would take him seriously, abolishes distinctions and creates room for everyone to flourish to their full potential. We may not have the answers to everything, we may sometimes lose heart and wonder why we bother, but compare the power of the vision contained in these words - that in Christ there is no Jew or Greek, bond or free, male or female - with the world as we know it, and even cold hearts may be set on fire. Ecclesiastes may strip away our cherished illusions, which will be painful, but he has little to offer in their place. He sings one

of the many tunes we hear in Scripture. But it needs to be heard against all the others. It needs to be complemented by them. Paul sets before us his vision of a community in which all find a common humanity in Christ, never mind who they are or where they have come from. As Proverbs - another of the wisdom books - tells us: 'The people perish where there is no vision'. Here is one to warm us back to life.