

**“Vanity, everything is vanity”
Wheatley, 31 July 2022**

Ecclesiastes 1:2,12-14 and 2:18-23

Lord, may the words I speak be those you want spoken, may the words we hear be those you want heard.

Well, as our friends of Bible Projects say, in their inimitable way, it is all “pretty intense”! Ecclesiastes has been dubbed “the strangest book in the canon” and according to a learned commentator, and I quote “when you read or study the book, you get the distinct feeling that it does not belong in the bible”. And indeed, it may appear pessimistic, even fatalistic, and its supposed hedonistic philosophy - with its famous “eat, drink and be merry” in chapter 8 – may make us feel a bit uncomfortable as this is not exactly what the Bible usually prescribes to us!

But according to Quoheloth- the Hebrew word for Ecclesiastes, as life is mostly monotonous, tedious, and futile, trying to find meaning in our existence is like trying to catch the wind, it is meaningless, it is HEVEL. Besides, as we see every day, bad things happen to **good** people, and good things happen to **bad** people. So even if we do believe that God is working out some larger plan, from our perspective, it seems pretty **unjust**, and this makes all our attempts to “decode” God’s purposes for our world extremely difficult, so the teacher thinks we shouldn’t even try.

Like with Job’s so-called comforters, popular wisdom of the time had it that the good people prospered and the wicked suffered. But the teacher’s observation of life has revealed to him the folly of such supposed wisdom: what often passes for wisdom in his day is worse than folly, it’s simply untrue. Both the good and the wicked ultimately face the same end, the same darkness of death awaits all, regardless of a person’s virtue or lack of it.

Yeah, all pretty intense...

So, if we consider all that, what do **we** do with that little book? Do we dismiss it as an anomaly, as a book that has no place in the Bible and that we should therefore ignore ...? **OR**, *on the contrary*, because it is so unusual and so strange, do we pay special attention to it, looking for answers for our time that it may contain?

I would suggest the latter!

When I first read Ecclesiastes = not the few titbits that the Lectionary feeds us, but the whole book in one go, as it only 8 pages long - and I would encourage you to do this = I found it **Refreshing**... yes refreshing, because the teacher refuses to sweeten the pill: He does not have time for any theology divorced from life, he does not have time for meek and mild piety, he does not have time for delusions which don’t ring true to people’s life experience. /// I don’t think he is fatalistic or pessimistic, he is eminently realistic: **He just tells it as it is**, something which would greatly appeal to me of course... but most importantly he also says that he does not understand, which is profoundly honest and that appeals to me too. His slogan is not “I think therefore I am” but “I think therefore I don’t have a clue”...

Indeed it is difficult to understand how it is possible that bad things happen to good people and vice versa : How many times have we heard somebody say, or may be thought it ourselves: “I have been good so why does God allow this to happen to me or to my loved ones ?” But God is not a bean counter whose blessings we can secure by our good behaviour: if we are good, God is obliged to do us good! No, of course not, because the corollary would be that, if we are not prospering, it is because

we have not been good. This is **perverse** ... Life is full of non sequitur, full of things that do not follow a pre-determined path ... Human beings face random events in their life, many of them bad: sickness, job losses, accidents, the end of significant relationships, all without apparent reason... The reality of those inexplicable suffering contradicts simplistic cause-and-effect platitudes about life.

But even if we don't live through any specific bad event at any specific moment, says the Teacher, we often feel that it is all monotony, drudgery and boredom ... "Same old, same old" ... Moreover, we know that we will all die in the end, and we will be forgotten and not only our legacy may not live on, but someone else will benefit from our toils and labour ... We are not in control and never were... And Covid was very good at remind us of that ... So, the Teacher's conclusion is that as everything is futile, a waste of time, a chasing after wind, we should make the most of the present by "eating, drinking and being merry", Carpe Diem sort of thing, enjoy all the pleasures you can gather in the present moment, forget what may or may not happen in the future and forget other people.

Really? Does that tally with the biblical precepts that we cherish and do our utmost to live by? Are we talking about Judaism and Christianity? Sounds more like an epicurean **or** Hedonistic attitude to life... No wonder many people think that Ecclesiastes does not belong in the Bible ...

BUT IT DOES! And you know why? Because Quoheleth is a teacher - the same way the Bible is a teaching book- so as all good teachers, he is not simply stating some obvious truisms that we all know, he is much more

clever than that, he is **what I would call a provocateur: he provokes us to think about our life and he says: come on you lot, react, think, contradict me...** He encourages us to resist what he says, to read against the grain, to ask questions, to argue with what he states... This is why it has been included in the Bible canon, in the wisdom part of it... All his discourse means "Look at your life and think about it" because if you live your life in an unconscious, passive or selfish way, then yes, it **does** lead to the conclusion that it is all futile, a waste of time, a chasing after wind. Interestingly, Socrates, much later, said exactly the same: "The unexamined life is not worth living"

So I think it is **in that perspective** that the famous aphorism "eat, drink and be merry" should be read, not as an hedonistic slogan of practicing excesses without regard for anybody else, but rather as an encouragement to enjoy your life as an implicit commandment from God **BECAUSE IT IS HIS CONSTANT GIFT TO US**. So **we must** "appreciate", in the sense of give value to what is near us: relationships, work, laughter **and even sorrow and tribulations**, because **God is in there too**. That is why the Teacher says that there is a time for everything: good and bad : A time to break down, and a time to build up - A time to weep, and a time to laugh- A time to mourn, a time to dance... Things change all the time, the only constant is the presence of God in our life.

So when confronted with all the difficulties of life and its apparent meaninglessness, the best we can do is take joy in the ordinary things of life **as the gifts of God to us**: hot baked bread, a good wine full of the warm south, conversation and laughs with friends, the babbling of a baby, the beauty of a sunset on the sea, the majesty of sequoia trees ... All of these and many many more, says the teacher in chapter 8, come "from the hand of God".

So ultimately, try as he might, Quoheleth **cannot, NOT believe**. Ultimately, he is faithful. This is the difference between Ecclesiastes and the rich fool in Luke 12. The latter is a fool because he stores up treasures for himself and not for God. **Quoheleth on the contrary worships God through shared enjoyment of all life's joys and pleasures and he urges us to do so too.**

THIS is the wonderful lesson and wisdom of Ecclesiastes!

Amen