

Some thoughts on the Lectionary Readings for Year A – Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time (2nd Service)

Lectionary Readings: Ecclesiastes 11: 1-12: 14
Psalm 119: 89-104
2 Timothy 2: 1-7
Mark 12: 28-34

For one week, and one week only, the Old Testament reading comes from Ecclesiastes. One commentator, in his introduction, has said:

“Ecclesiastes is one of the most puzzling books of the Bible. Its apparently unorthodox statements and extreme pessimism caused its inclusion in the canon of Scripture to be questioned.”

Ecclesiastes is an Anglicized form of the Greek translation (*eklesiastes*) of the Hebrew word *Qoheleth* – ‘one who leads an assembly, a preacher’ – the book is often referred to as ‘Ecclesiastes or The Preacher’.

By tradition, but questioned because there is no direct reference, the author was King Solomon; the first verse of chapter 1 reads:

The words of the Teacher (*or the leader of the assembly*), son of David, king of Jerusalem:

It is this reference to the “son of David” that suggests Solomon as author and probably led to Ecclesiastes being included in the OT canon.

The tone of the book is set in verse 2 of chapter 1:

‘Meaningless! Meaningless!’ says the Teacher.
‘Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.’

‘The Message’ amplifies this short, straightforward saying! :

Smoke, nothing but smoke. [That’s what the Quester says.] There’s nothing to anything—it’s all smoke. What’s there to show for a lifetime of work, a lifetime of working your fingers to the bone? One generation goes its way, the next one arrives, but nothing changes—it’s business as usual for old planet earth. The sun comes up and the sun goes down, then does it again, and again—the same old round. The wind blows south, the wind blows north. Around and around and around it blows, blowing this way, then that—the whirling, erratic wind. All the rivers flow into the sea, but the sea never fills up. The rivers keep flowing to the same old place, and then start all over and do it again. Everything’s boring, utterly boring— no one can find any meaning in it. Boring to the eye, boring to the ear. What was will be again, what happened will happen again. There’s nothing new on this earth. Year after year it’s the same old thing. Does someone call out, “Hey, *this* is new”? Don’t get excited—it’s the same old story. Nobody remembers what happened yesterday. And the things that will happen tomorrow? Nobody’ll remember them either. Don’t count on being remembered.

In this ‘translation’, The Message picks up on the pessimism referred to by the opening commentator. For a young person, the experiences of life are new and exciting but as time passes one comes to realise that life goes round and round in circles – nothing actually changes. Our author is writing from this perspective of more mature years - The exciting times of youth are past; some misfortunes have been experienced; what lies in the future is uncertain. Despite this element of pessimism there is the underlying assumption that God has His purposes and they are being worked out.

The passage selected for the Lectionary reading has, in the New International Version, three section headings – “Invest in many ventures”, “Remember your creator while young” and “The conclusion of the matter”. The first of these section headings is at the beginning of chapter 11 and in the NIV we read:

- ¹Ship your grain across the sea; after many days you may receive a return.
²Invest in seven ventures, yes, in eight; you do not know what disaster may come upon the land.

These verses are perhaps more familiar in the Authorised (King James) Version:

- ¹Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days.
²Give a portion to seven, and also to eight; for thou knowest not what evil shall be upon the earth.

As the section unfolds we find the Preacher urging his listeners to remain active from morning to evening. You do not know which of your actions will be successful – you do not understand the work of God:

- ⁵As you do not know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed in a mother’s womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things.
⁶Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let your hands not be idle, for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well.

The ‘jaundiced’ view of the Preacher is seen again in the section regarding youth – those are ‘happy’ days, but troublesome ones will follow. Another verse often taken, to stand alone, is found at the beginning of chapter 12.

Remember your Creator while young

- ⁷Light is sweet, and it pleases the eyes to see the sun.
⁸However many years anyone may live, let them enjoy them all.
But let them remember the days of darkness, for there will be many. **Everything to come is meaningless.**
⁹You who are young, be happy while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth.
Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, **but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment.**
¹⁰So then, banish anxiety from your heart and cast off the troubles of your body, for youth and vigour are meaningless.

12 Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach
 when you will say, 'I find no pleasure in them'—
²before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark, and the clouds return after the rain;
³when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men stoop, when the grinders cease because they are few,
 and those looking through the windows grow dim;
⁴when the doors to the street are closed and the sound of grinding fades;
 when people rise up at the sound of birds, but all their songs grow faint;
⁵when people are afraid of heights and of dangers in the streets; when the almond tree blossoms and the grasshopper
 drags itself along
 and desire no longer is stirred. Then people go to their eternal home and mourners go about the streets.
⁶**Remember him** – before the silver cord is severed, and the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at
 the spring, and the wheel broken at the well,
⁷and the dust returns to the ground it came from, **and the spirit returns to God who gave it.**

⁸**'Meaningless! Meaningless!' says the Teacher. 'Everything is meaningless!'**

The final section – “The conclusion of the matter” – appears to have been written by somebody other than ‘The Teacher’ as it is describing his wisdom (more evidence for Solomon?) and his teaching. It is brought to its conclusion in verses 13 and 14:

¹³**Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter:
 fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind.**

¹⁴**For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good
 or evil.**

Yes, the Teacher/Preacher says, “God is working His purpose out” but he does not appear to have so strong a vision as that expressed by Arthur Ainger in his hymn (MHB 812, H&P 769).

The Psalm returns to a further two segments of Psalm 119 – *Lamedh*, the twelfth and *Mem*, the thirteenth letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

Like the writer of Ecclesiastes he has known affliction in his life but there the similarity ends! The Psalmist sees God’s word as ‘eternal’, and His Laws as enduring. He calls on the Lord to be saved from the wicked around him but it is a cry in confidence that the Lord is there and in control.

In *Mem* there are a number of statements – I wonder how many of these we can say apply to our lives?

I love your law – I meditate on it all day long.
 Your commands are always with me – they make me wise
 I am more insightful than my teachers – I meditate on your statutes
 I understand more than the elders – I obey your precepts
 I keep off every evil path – so that I may obey your word

The section ends with these three verses:

¹⁰² I have not departed from your laws, for you yourself have taught me.
¹⁰³ How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!
¹⁰⁴ I gain understanding from your precepts; therefore I hate every wrong path.

Moving into New Testament times, the background has changed significantly. The Psalmist and the Preacher strove to keep the written Law. By the time Paul writes to Timothy; The Lord has fulfilled the OT prophecies; Jesus has come into the world and taught about the nature of God; He has revealed a personal relationship for all followers with Himself and with the Father; the Spirit has been given and is active in individuals and in the Church.

New Testament faith does not, however, mean an end to suffering. Paul had been released from ‘house arrest’ in 62/63 AD and set out on his fourth missionary journey. On this journey he commissioned Titus to remain as his representative in Crete and he left Timothy in charge of the church in Ephesus. Having moved on from these places he spent time in Philippi, where he wrote his first letter to Timothy and his letter to Titus. Sometime later he returned to Rome and was imprisoned again, by the Emperor Nero; this time chained like a common criminal in a cold dungeon. It was in this dungeon that Paul wrote to Timothy for the second time – knowing that he faced imminent execution.

2 Timothy 1 begins with greetings to “Timothy, my dear son.” These are followed by a passage “Encouraging Timothy to be faithful” before we come to the Lectionary reading for today – headed “The appeal renewed”.

Timothy is first reminded to “be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus”. We remind ourselves of the meaning of GRACE – the totally unearned and undeserved gift of God. God is LOVE and because of this, Jesus came into the world to die on the cross at Calvary that we might live. We are reminded of this each week as we use words from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians to conclude our services:

The GRACE of the Lord Jesus Christ
 and the LOVE of God
 and the FELLOWSHIP of the Holy Spirit
 be with us all evermore.

Paul gives three examples for Timothy to follow – a soldier who desires to please his commanding officer; an athlete who trains and competes ‘by the rules’; a hard working farmer – reminding us of a verse in our reading from Ecclesiastes:

Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let your hands not be idle, for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well.

Paul urges Timothy to “reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this.” He then goes on, beyond the verses in our reading, to complete the “renewed appeal”:

⁸ Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, ⁹ for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God’s word is not chained.

¹⁰ Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.

¹¹ Here is a trustworthy saying:

If we died with him, we will also live with him;

¹² if we endure, we will also reign with him.

If we disown him, he will also disown us;

¹³ if we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself.

Our Gospel reading is one of the two accounts found in the New Testament of Jesus giving “The greatest Commandment”. We may think that “loving God as much as possible” and “loving our neighbour as we love ourselves” is a uniquely Christian point of view. In this we would be mistaken.

We note in the Mark passage that in answer to the question “of all the commandments, which is the most important?” Jesus gives two ‘parts’ to His answer. He is picking on two themes from the Pentateuch. The first is found at Deuteronomy 6:4 and is known as the ‘Shema’ (Hebrew for ‘hear’) – to this day it is used at the beginning of synagogue services.

⁴ Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one.

or *The LORD our God is one LORD; or The LORD is our God, the LORD is one; or The LORD is our God, the LORD alone*

⁵ Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

The second part to the answer Jesus gives is found in Leviticus 19:18:

¹⁸ Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but **love your neighbour as yourself**.
I am the LORD.

Our reading started with a ‘Teacher of the Law’ listening to Jesus in debate. How often they came with ‘test’ questions, determined to trip Him up so that He could be accused. This teacher noted the good answers Jesus gave – if the preceding passages in Mark describe what the teacher heard, the first discussion was one of those trick questions; paying taxes to Caesar. Caesar was considered a god by the Romans and his portrait was on the coinage. Jesus takes a coin and asks whose image is on it – an anathema to look at it or to answer for orthodox Jews! There was amazement when He said it was right to contribute to the State but render God what was His due.

The second discussion, brought by the Sadducees, concerned marriage at the Resurrection - you will remember that they did not believe in the Resurrection. It is a highly concocted situation that is presented to Jesus – His reply is to quote Scripture at them revealing their lack of understanding.

The teacher of the Law is impressed with what he hears before asking his question about the most important commandment; he is also impressed by the answer that Jesus gave to his question.

I wonder if he became a follower?

Spirit of God, descend upon my heart;
Wean it from earth; through all its pulses move;
Stoop to my weakness, mighty as Thou art,
And make me love Thee as I ought to love.

I ask no dream, no prophet-ecstasies,
No sudden rending of the veil of clay,
No angel-visitant, no opening skies;
But take the dimness of my soul away.

Hast Thou not bid me love Thee, God and King -
All, all Thine own, soul, heart, and strength, and mind?
I see Thy cross – there teach my heart to cling:
O let me seek Thee, and O let me find!

Teach me to feel that Thou art always nigh;
Teach me the struggles of the soul to bear,
To check the rising doubt, the rebel sigh;
Teach me the patience of unanswered prayer.

Teach me to love Thee as Thine angels love,
One holy passion filling all my frame -
The baptism of the heaven-descended Dove,
My heart an altar, and Thy love the flame.

George Croly