

Sermon for Evensong on the 19th Sunday after Trinity, 27th  
October 2019

*Ecclesiastes 11, 12; 2 Timothy 2:1-7 (see  
<http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=439196125>) - Not in the  
Reader's Digest*

I don't know what reading matter you have in your downstairs loo, or, I suppose, whether that loo does contain a library: but on the assumption that you read, rather than playing video games, in there, I wanted to mention that when I looked at our Bible readings for this evening - or at least at one of them - I got a strong Reader's Digest feeling. You know, those wholesome little paragraphs at the end of the main articles and stories in the Reader's Digest - possibly one-liners, suggesting that it might be a good thing to 'cast thy bread upon the waters' or something like that.

Both the piece from the second Letter to Timothy and the two chapters from Ecclesiastes could fall into this category of old saws and ancient wisdom. But if you look a bit more closely and compare these two bits of wisdom, you'll see straightway that the piece from Ecclesiastes is actually rather bleak and nihilistic. You find the word which perhaps everyone associates with Ecclesiastes, 'vanity'. It is, according to the learned commentators on this passage, a Hebrew word, *hebel*, which is 'conventionally translated 'vanity', [but] the literal sense of this term is more often used metaphorically, to suggest transience, uselessness or deceptiveness'. (Stuart Weekes in John Barton and John Muddiman, eds, (2001) *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, Oxford, OUP, p. 423).

'Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher; all is vanity'. Whether you 'cast your bread on the waters', meaning if you speculate in different markets, possibly with seven different products and seven different opportunities - or perhaps even eight - you can't

know what's going to happen. Whether it's going to rain; whether a tree will fall in one direction rather than another, and so on. You can't know. You'd better make hay while the sun shines.

*Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun:*

*But if a man live many years, and rejoice in them all; yet let him remember the days of darkness; for they shall be many. All that cometh is vanity.*

The Preacher, so-called - Ecclesiastes is a translation into Greek of a Hebrew word, *Qoheleth*, and it could also mean the Speaker or the Teacher - whoever he is, after these bleak beginnings, he says,

*Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.*

That ending is rather incongruous with what has gone before, which is sceptical, cynical - with no thought of God, until all of a sudden He appears as the Judge eternal. Some scholars think that this bit was added on by a later scribe to make this 'wisdom literature' seem more scriptural.

But what about the God that Ecclesiastes talks about, albeit that He appears only rarely? Ecclesiastes says, *Fear God, and keep his commandments*. The other day I was asked, 'Why is it that we should fear God, if God is good and loving, as we say He is?' It's a good question. I'll come back to it in a minute.

In Ecclesiastes, on the face of things it doesn't much matter what we do, whether it will make our lives flourish or not. It

is beyond our control, and the only certainty is that at the end of our lives we will come before the Judge Eternal.

The advice to Timothy, in our second reading, is rather different. God doesn't just appear at random, on rare occasions. Everything is affected by the phenomenon of Jesus Christ, by the things that we learn about Him and receive from Him. So in the letter, Timothy needs to be strengthened by the grace, by the free gift, of Christ Jesus. He needs to be tough -

*as a good soldier of Jesus Christ.*

God himself is asked to help Timothy to understand what he ought to do. There is no ultimate hopelessness, as there is in the Ecclesiastes world; there are challenges, but at the end, Timothy can enjoy the fruits of grace:

*The husbandman that laboureth must be first partaker of the fruits.*

What a difference it makes to know about Jesus! The Speaker, Ecclesiastes, has such a bleak outlook. It doesn't matter what you do in life: God doesn't take any notice of you, except perhaps until the very end on the day of Judgement. You might as well make hay while the sun shines. God, as Ecclesiastes sees Him, really doesn't take much notice of us. This isn't what we are told about the God of Moses, who made a covenant, a solemn agreement, with his people, taking a very serious interest in them. 'I shall be your God, and you shall be my people.'

For Ecclesiastes God is the ultimate creator and judge eternal: so enjoy life while you can. As well as 'vanity of vanities, everything is vanity', Ecclesiastes is where you find

that passage which some people like to have read at funerals, 'a time to live, a time to die. .. Everything in its season,' and so on [3:1-9]. As Professor John Barton has pointed out, no-one usually quotes the last line of the passage, which simply asks, What's the point of all that work? (See John Barton, 2019, *A History of the Bible*, London, Allen Lane, p68)

But it's at least arguable that Ecclesiastes doesn't reflect the way we understand how God works now. Compare and contrast how the writer of the letter to Timothy understands it. Your life is better, you are more able to withstand trials and tribulations, you will have inner strength if you are a believer, if you are 'in Christ.' 'In Christ' is actually an expression which doesn't appear in the letters to Timothy, but it is quintessentially how St Paul puts it in many of his letters.

People who are in Christ have Christ in them; so their relationship with God is even more intimate than the covenant relationship that Moses and the prophets proclaimed. The chosen people of God are no longer just one nation on earth, but anyone, anyone can be saved, if they are open to the gospel of Jesus Christ and let Jesus into their hearts. There is no question of eat drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die. The Christian understanding is that we no longer have that threat hanging over us. Jesus has conquered death and we have nothing to fear because we are destined for eternal life.

So why should we fear God? It's a good question. If we are in Ecclesiastes' world, where God is the ultimate creator, the all-powerful, the almighty, all-knowing, and our judge at the end of time but not interfering with us much before then, with power to cast us out into the eternal darkness, then

perhaps the way we should approach Him is the same way we would approach anything which is overwhelmingly big, disproportionately powerful, for whom we are a mere fleabite.

Think what happens in confrontations with things which are infinitely powerful. In biblical times kings could demonstrate their power by putting people together with wild animals. Think of Daniel in the lions' den. The strength of the lions reflected the power of the king. The king could not avoid demonstrating his power by putting Daniel in with the lions. He didn't expect him to survive. But what do you think Daniel was feeling? Granted that he had a very strong faith, but I can't believe that he was not afraid. Confronted with overwhelming force, he was afraid of that force.

I think that one of the wonderful things which we can take from the revelation which is the life of Jesus and his teaching, is that God is a loving God. He isn't somebody who would throw us to the lions. He isn't a lion himself. He might be the lion of Judah, according to the early Christians in Ethiopia, but he is a very kindly and well behaved lion, more like Aslan in the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe.

I think it is intelligible for us to fear God in the sense that we respect the infinite power of the divine, but now that we have had the revelation of Jesus, because, as he says in St John's Gospel, 'anyone who has seen me has seen the Father', we know that the first great commandment is a commandment of love rather than of fear. We should trust in the Lord and love the Lord our God. It is precisely that love which drives out fear.

The point of the Christian revelation, the key difference from the pointlessness that Ecclesiastes laments, is that we

should never despair of being able to do some good. It means that Christians must be engaged, involved in practical things - dare I say, even political things.

If you say that preachers like me should stay away from politics, look at today's headlines. The Archbishop of Canterbury is reported in today's Sunday Times as saying that the Prime Minister is 'pouring petrol on divided Britain'. The Archbishop of York has written in today's Observer about the poor migrants who died sealed in a refrigerated lorry. His article is headed 'Grief is not enough. We must open our doors as well as our hearts'. And also in the Times, this time on Saturday, Revd Rosemary Durward, from our neighbours St Martin's East Horsley, wrote an enlightened piece about under the title 'Faith-led citizens' forum can heal our disunited kingdom'. Christianity and politics can mix: indeed they must mix.

I think we should leave Ecclesiastes and his old saws metaphorically in an old copy of the Reader's Digest and instead, as the writer of the letters to Timothy says, we should get out there on parade with the inner strength which comes from Jesus at the heart of our being. I'll leave it to you to think what trials and tribulations we can confront in today's world, but as we confront them we needn't be cynical. It's not vanity of vanities. It's more 'Soldiers of Christ arise and put your armour on'.

Amen

Hugh Bryant