

"Meaningless....everything is meaningless." Those words from the "Teacher" are very negative aren't they? Here you are you may have had a good week or done something nice yesterday or be celebrating St David's day today so you come to church with a bit of a spring in your step and what do you get? - meaningless! It brings you down doesn't it?

So why are we today starting a short series in Ecclesiastes in which over 30 times that sentiment appears?

Well in short because it is part of the word of God which as Paul reminds us is, "God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16)

We study it because this is part of God's word but also because it helps us to understand some of the thinking of our world and to challenge it in the light of the whole of the Bible. That means as we go through Ecclesiastes we will need the rest of the Bible to help fill out the picture that the Teacher gives to us.

On the surface the view of the Teacher is very jaundiced. Look at vs 2&3, ""Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless." What does man gain from all his labour at which he toils under the sun?"

There are two key phrases here which are repeated over and over again in the book. The first we have noted is "meaningless" and the second is under the sun. We'll come back to that later but for now we ask what has caused the Teacher to come to this view that life under the sun is meaningless? Let me suggest two main things from these verses Firstly

The experience of life - v4-11

Now there are a number of things in these verses which have caused the Teacher to see everything as meaningless.

1. Life seems to change but is actually just the same.

So v4 generations change but the world stays the same. The sun gets up and goes down v5 and then v6 the wind blows one way and then the next. I have to say I find that is very true as I watch the leaves in our garden blow to one end of the garden and then a few days later the wind direction changes and they blow down the other end!. It is pointless - meaningless. Then v7 the streams run into the sea but it never seems to get full. Things go round and round but everything remains the same. It is this observation which caused the Teacher to call it all "meaningless".

2. Life has no ultimate satisfaction.

If we look at v8 we see that he viewed everything as dull and wearisome. In fact it is so wearisome that it was beyond human ability to describe it. And while our eyes may see much and ears hear much there is always more to see, hear and do. It is not the case of seen it done it got the T shirt! We don't get a sense of complete satisfaction.

Have you ever been walking up a hill and you see what you think is the top but when you get there it is only a ridge and there is more beyond and after you have gone over half a dozen such ridges you wonder if you want to bother going on - that is the feeling behind this verse.

3. Life ultimately is pointless.

In my previous church the first Vicar had been appointed in something like 1197. I can't now remember what he was like - nor could anyone else in the church. In fact most of the Vicar's there were not remembered. This fact the Teacher sees as evidence that life ultimately is pointless. After a while no one recognises we've been here!

The Teacher observed life "under the sun" life on earth and he described it as meaningless. The many experiences of life led him to that conclusion.

But then secondly it wasn't just experience it was

The mind of man v12-18

Here we get into the actual words of the Teacher, whereas the first 11 verses were a report of what he said. But note what he says here. V16 he blows his own trumpet saying he has more understanding than others and he has a lot of wisdom. So this was a wise man and indeed the whole book is part of the wisdom literature of the people of God. Then go back to v13 I devoted myself to study. He's done his Ph D on this topic. Again from v13 he has studied everything under heaven that is everything on earth , v14 everything under the sun. Here was someone who had thought deeply about life and come to this view that it has no point. It is meaningless. But we have to note that it is life "under the sun" that is life here on earth. Life in the here and now with no thought to any eternal dimension.

I think this is very relevant for us in today's world for there are many who will claim similar wisdom. The teacher was a man of God who limited his perspective simply to this world.

In our world today there are plenty who will concur with this perspective of the Teacher but usually it is the thinking of the atheist who doesn't believe in God and also of the secularist, that is the person who wants to keep religion out of the affairs of the world. It doesn't necessarily mean they don't find any value or joy in life but that ultimately it has no meaning.

Let me give you a couple of quotes to show what I mean:

"There are many things that make life worth holding on to and savouring. But life is unpredictable and we are often mysteries even to

ourselves. We think success, happiness, helping others, or surpassing ourselves will make life worth living, but we can always be wrong or frustrated by events.....the basic answer would be the same: the only sense we can make of the idea that life has meaning is that there are some reasons to live rather than to die, and those reasons are to be found in the living of life itself." (Julian Baggini - What's it all about)

And then a second quote

"I am often asked "Why bother? If life is a meaningless accident, with no ultimate goal or purpose, why not just kill yourself now? To which I would reply - "Have you ever built a snowman?" After all, snowmen are ephemeral objects, soon to be melted in the sun. A snowman has no ultimate purpose or goal, and in a few weeks there will be no trace of its ever existing. We build snowmen because all of us, theists and atheists, live here and now. In the context of our own brief mortal lives, we are able to enjoy this life and gain pleasure from ultimately pointless acts." - (quote from the net.)

Isn't that just the thinking here? Life under the sun has no meaning. It is a matter for the here and now.

But you see something within me shouts "no" and I believe that the author here who was using the Teachers words had the same thought because right at the end of the book he wrote "God will bring every deed into judgement" (12:14). How can life have no meaning if my every action will be judged by God? But here is the where we need to leave Ecclesiastes for a moment and hear thirdly

The voice of God.

We could look at many places in Scripture and see where God speaks of life not being circular but linear and of God having a plan and purpose which he is working out in the history of the world and in the lives of his people. I just want to take us to that second reading we had today from Romans 8:18-30 and to look at v20, "For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope."

1. The frustration of creation - that is what we have just been thinking about and the word frustration is very similar to meaningless or vanity. As someone wrote, "the whole book of Ecclesiastes is a commentary on this verse."

2. It was subjected to frustration by the will of one. That is it is God who has subjected creation to this seeming futility or purposelessness as a result of the fall.

Now if we left it there we would simply have Ecclesiastes. Life is vanity and it is as a result of God's action.

3. it was subjected to frustration in hope. Those two little words give the key to creation and the purpose to life. Those two little words move us from a circular pattern of thinking of the world to a linear pattern. There is a goal and there is a purpose to life and that goal and purpose are to be found in God and his aim to redeem the world.

The story of salvation takes us from the creation of heaven and earth, through the fall and creation's frustration to the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. Heaven is our aim and our goal.

If we live simply under the sun as if the here and now were all that there is then we may well, even if we are people of faith, find life has no meaning. But in everything we need to hear the voice of God and hold the heavenly perspective.

So where does all this leave us?

The application

1. recognise the thinking of the world. Be aware that because for most people "under the sun" is the limit of their thinking then the way they view life will be very different from you if you are a Christian. This will lead to

2. People will question your faith. In fact I could put it stronger and say people will rubbish your faith. Let me give you one more quote from a website comment, "I object to being told I'm going to hell - I hope you understand that. How insecure and immature you must be to think in such childish terms, fearing your god and all that. If that's the kind of god you've thought up for yourself, I can very well do without him, thank you. In contrast, I wish you well. I'm sure you won't go to hell when you die. But I do hope that, whilst you're still alive, you'll eventually begin to use your brain cells and start thinking in a more rational manner."

See there the pattern of thinking with I at the centre and the rubbishing of faith as childish and as lacking thought. It is in the light of this that Peter encouraged the Christians to be ready to answer for their faith, "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:15)

So our faith and especially our hope needs to be thought through.

3. Build a world view with God at the centre. We do this by holding to God's revelation in Jesus and in the Bible. The Teacher tells us what he has understood and so do many in the world but here in the Bible we have the full revelation of the world as God understands it and it is that we need to understand and not just so that we can refute the claims of others but for our own help and comfort. Next week we will look with Mathew Sleeman at work and how toil is meaningless. Now if that is so, then getting up tomorrow will not be easy. But if, as we saw in our recent series on work, our work is our chief ministry for God and if there is this salvation story running through history then there is every reason to bounce out of bed tomorrow.

4. Live in the light of the goal.

That is we should be living 24/7 with God because our every act and everything that happens in our lives has meaning in the light of

eternity.

I remember some years back when I was living on the outskirts of London on a Saturday morning going down to our local station to take the tube into London. It was absolutely packed. People were jammed in worse than on a morning rush hour! But on that packed tube people were smiling! More people were singing. There seemed a real sense of joy and even excitement - we were going to Wembley to watch Watford in the FA cup Final. The goal made the journey and the discomfort worth it - unless of course you didn't have the same goal and were only going into town to do some shopping!

Live in the light of the goal - here is the purpose, the hope of life especially in the frustration and the difficulties of life.

Many of us will be familiar with the story of Job, another of the bits of wisdom literature in the Bible. At one of his low points Job, complaining to his friends about his pains from which he could find no relief, said this, "I despise my life; I would not live forever. Let me alone; my days have no meaning" (Job 7:16) - meaningless. The opening words of God's response when it finally came are, "Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge" (Job 38:2) and then God questions Job about what he knows asking him if he was there when God laid the foundation of the world, if he'd ever given orders to the morning and so on so that Job's final response was, "Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know." (Job 42:3) But we can know for God has chosen to reveal his plan and purpose for us in Jesus Christ and through his word. So that when things are tough we can see that there is a purpose and that it is worth continuing up the hill of life to the goal of heaven.

Friends the Teacher had only limited understanding and his words are a challenge for us.

Our experience of life and the thinking of others may cause us to question whether this life has meaning and purpose but the voice of God assures us that there is purpose for life in that we don't live under the sun but in the power and grace of God.