

"I want my kids to have the education I never had," is a quote attributed to Jade Goody who died last Sunday.

Whether she said it or not it is certainly not an unusual desire in parents. My Dad certainly wanted me and my brothers to have a good education and so do many of you here today. Education and learning is seen as the great goal for our children. Today Great Binfields, tomorrow Oxford and then the world!

We want our children to be well educated because we see that is the way to get on in the world. We live in a world that puts great emphasis on increasing its store of knowledge. So last year we had the Large Hadron Collider a powerful and impossibly complicated machine that was intended to smash particles together at super-fast speeds in a bid to unlock the secrets of the Universe.

But of course the search for knowledge is not just for its own sake. Understanding the world and the universe is seen as the answer to life's problems. If only we knew more, then life would be better fuller richer.

The teacher, whose words are included in this book of Ecclesiastes, certainly bought into that line of thinking.

He was wise. He told us so in 1:16, "I thought to myself, "Look, I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge."" And he was not content to leave it there as we see from today's passage, 7:23 "I am determined to be wise".

As a wise man he set himself a task, 1:13, "I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven." He wanted to understand what was going on. What made the world as it was? In our passage today he talks about understanding the "scheme of things" (v25, 27). So many people down the ages have followed his search trying to understand the world in which we live and why it is as it is and why we humans are as we are.

John Humphrys, the former Radio 4 presenter, is one. In 2006 he did a series of interviews on the radio under the title "In search of God." The series resulted in a book entitled "In God we doubt". In the book Humphrys says this, "I still recall the exact times and places when the Big Questions declared themselves to my childish consciousness. The first arrived when I was in short trousers and knew even less than I know today.

I had been playing with some friends on a disused aerodrome near my home in Cardiff.

It was dark. The glory of the night sky had yet to be lost to light pollution and on cloudless nights the stars went on for ever. That was what troubled me. How could they go on for ever? And if the universe was everything, what was it all in? And how could it be in anything because that would have to be in something else and . . . and . . . and so on. And what was there before any of it existed? And how did it all come into existence? And finally - the really, really Big Question - why?"

The Teacher, as a wise man seeking wisdom also asked big questions. Set in the pages of this book are his findings. So what was the result of his research?

"Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind." (1:17) He realised that all his searching for knowledge and wisdom was like chasing after the wind. It was meaningless. Now for those of us who have been here over the last few weeks that doesn't surprise us because this is the constant word of the Teacher that everything is meaningless. But why was his quest for wisdom and to understand the world meaningless?

Let me suggest some answers from the Teacher's perspective.

A. because the search for knowledge leads to frustration as he points out in 1:18, "For with much wisdom comes much sorrow (frustration); the more knowledge, the more grief (pain)." The frustration is that in many instances there are no answers only more questions isn't that so?

It certainly was for John Humphrys who says he went looking for God and ended up an angry agnostic. There many things out of reach of the human mind.

B. because ultimately the wise man and the fool suffer the same fate so why bother to be wise? "The wise man has eyes in his head, while the fool walks in the darkness; but I came to realize that the same fate overtakes them both." (2:14) If we all die the same what's the point? If you are new to the Teacher and this series you'll have picked up by now that he was not the happiest of people. You'd not find him singing "always look on the bright side of life".

C. because so much is beyond our human understanding and comprehension, "I said, "I will be wise"; but it was far from me. That which is, is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?" That is one translation of 7:23-24.

This is where the Teacher is at in our passage today. He's trying to understand the scheme of things but so much seems so far off and so deeply hidden it is impossible to discover it. This is the conclusion he seems to come to in vs 27-28a - "I was still searching but not finding" and so he was unable to discover the scheme of things.

The whole thing seemed elusive. I was watching one of those David Attenborough documentaries a few weeks ago looking at how the salmon return to their spawning grounds. They were showing a young bear cub trying to catch a salmon and how elusive the salmon was. I get the same impression here that the Teacher is seeking to understand the scheme of things and just as he thinks he's got it, it slips away.

So, not surprisingly we come to his summary in 8:1. Is anyone like a wise person? Does anyone understand the totality of things? The

answer to both is no. In the light of that the last words are to be seen as sarcastic because the Teacher certainly was not wearing a smile!

So the Teacher sees wisdom and the search to know the scheme of things to be meaningless a chasing after the wind. Of course wisdom is good we see that in 7:11. It is good and benefits those who see the sun, that is it benefits us here and now. We have seen so many benefits from people's wisdom, things like penicillin, the mobile phone, the internet, the internal combustion engine and Kettering Town getting to the 4th round of the FA cup! Wisdom has its benefits but as the Teacher points out they are linked to the here and now, to making this life more comfortable.

What he realised was he couldn't answer the big questions in life. In these verses there is one big question which he mentions in slightly different ways:

V15 - why do the good appear to die young and the wicked live a long life?

V20 - there is no one on earth who has never sinned.

V28 - he has trouble finding an upright person.

V29 - God made us good but we have turned away from him and tried to do things our own way.

What is the problem that plagued the Teacher? It was the problem of human sin. Why are humans sinful? Why have we humans turned from God so that there is no one who has not sinned and why so often do the wicked seem to prosper?

The teacher had sought to find an answer. He'd thought about it, asked others about, asked for a 50/50 and even phoned a friend. But he could not find a satisfactory answer. At least I don't think the answer is satisfactory. Have a look at vs 16&17 and see what you think.

Don't kill yourself trying to be overly good or overly wise but then don't kill yourself trying to be too wicked.

And then in v18 try and live a balanced life a little good and a little bad. That's the answer his wisdom threw up.

How well he shows the limits of human wisdom and how deep are the mysteries of the world which God has created and the plans God has for that world.

The teacher is right they are "far off and most profound" or "deep and very deep". So much so that human thinking can never understand. They will for ever remain elusive and out of our grasp if we try and attain them with our human minds.

To sum up the Teacher's view, to search for wisdom under the sun is meaningless a chasing after the wind.

However as we come into the New Testament we see something quite different. In that what humans can't discover, God has revealed.

You must have played hide and seek either with people hiding or where you hide an object and people have to try and find it. When you play it with children they will very quickly ask you to give them some clues, help them find it or just simply show them where it is hidden.

Well what has been hidden for centuries from the human mind we see revealed to us in the pages of the New Testament.

a. General revelation - God has revealed his mind, heart and purposes through his Holy Spirit, who is himself God. Just a couple of verses here to show this, "God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God." (1 Cor 2:10-11) Can you see what Paul was saying? Those deep things beyond the wit of humans to discern, God has revealed through his spirit to us humans.

b. The revelation is focussed in Jesus - Col 2:2-3, "My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding". Well that looks pretty good people will have full understanding but how and of what? Let's continue, "in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ". The key to the mystery, the key to the big questions of life that so often go unanswered is Jesus. But then you knew if the Vicar asked a question the answer has to be Jesus. Before I explain more let's bring in v3, "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." All wisdom is to be found in Jesus. By that I don't mean the internal combustion engine but the answers to the big questions of life, the questions the teacher was asking about the scheme of things.

I remember in April 1972 I was staying at a friend's house when there was a ring at the door. On answering it I found some JW's there. I chatted to them for a while and we got onto miracles. They were trying to explain why miracles could happen and I was telling them that there was no way Jesus could have done some of the things mentioned in the Bible.

Today I would say something different because of who Jesus is. If he is the son of God as the Bible teaches and many of us here believe then of course he can do miracles but it all depends on who Jesus is. Friends if you are here today and if you haven't really found answers to the big questions of life then let me encourage you to take a look at Jesus. Read a gospel, talk about him with a friend because God's revelation is focussed in Jesus.

c. Specific answers are to be found through God's revelation in Jesus by the Spirit, such as the questions that the Teacher had about human sin.

What the Spirit of God shows us through the word of God is that God made us humans in his likeness to have a relationship with

himself. However, we have gone against God by trying to run life our own way without him. All of us without exception have done this and as a result we all deserve God's punishment of death. But because he loves us God the father sent his Son Jesus into the world. Here was one man who always did God's will and lived his life without sin. Further he died on a cross in our place taking the punishment we deserve for our sin so that we might be forgiven and restored into a right relationship with God. God raised Jesus to life again as ruler of the world. Now he gives new life to all who will receive. But one day he will return as judge. This leaves us two ways to live. We can continue our way and face the judgement of God or we can live with Jesus as our ruler and know God's forgiveness and be assured of eternal life.

If we move from April 1972 to Oct 8th 1972 this was what changed my life radically.

I had been interested in church and that kind of stuff since I had first gone with a girl friend. But I knew I couldn't live a good life, which was what I thought God wanted. I tried and failed over and over again and got frustrated. I had done a teacher training course and trained to teach RE but all my studies like the teacher didn't answer the big questions. But then someone explained the cross of Jesus to me. It was as if a huge weight had been taken off my shoulders. I now knew that it was not about how well I lived but what Jesus had done. That day I came to faith in Jesus and have sought to focus my life on him ever since.

God has revealed to us the deep mysteries of life and we find our answers in Jesus as the Holy Spirit helps us to understand.

As we conclude we see wisdom is not a bad thing but human wisdom is limited. It cannot plumb the deep things of God and the world in which God has placed us. However God has revealed to us his own mind that we may understand his will and purposes and more his love and grace. But it is to him we must look for the answers. As another piece of wisdom writing puts it, "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding." (Prov 3:5)