

Ecclesiastes 12:1-14 'Living for Today' Sunday 19th.April 2009-04-17

2nd. reading: 1Corinthians 15:1-11

We have just had Purim, Passover and Easter Sunday. Now we are back to Ecclesiastes - whether we have been good, bad or indifferent, we all die! Dead flies give perfume a bad name! Fools are put in high positions! What is twisted cannot be straightened! I have seen the tears of the oppressed and they have no comforter! No wonder this is called 'Low Sunday.' You even have me droning on, and on and on!

Why is Ecclesiastes in the Hebrew Scripture? Where does it fit in?

The first thing I want to say is that Ecclesiastes was part of 'the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms' that Jesus came to explain. Ecclesiastes is clearly part of the group of holy writings. The Jewish scriptures had been reviewed just before Jesus came to earth - in 70BC, 70 scholars sat for 70 days to translate the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek. This is called the Septuagint.

How did they know it was 70BC? They did not, but it gives us a reminder of when the translation took place. I believe it was a little before this. The important thing is that in order to do the work the scholars reviewed what was in their scriptures and what was not. Ecclesiastes was in. Was it 70 scholars? Probably not, but it was a significant number that gathered for the work and this gives us confidence that the work had wide support. Did they take 70 days? No, but they did it in just a few years - a remarkable feat.

So Ecclesiastes is very much a part of the Hebrew Scriptures - what we now call the Old Testament.

How does it fit into the overall teaching and understanding of Judaism? Present day orthodox Judaism is apparently remarkably similar to the time of Jesus and before then, so a look at their beliefs today can help us understand the wider theological setting of Old Testament. Judaism has a large focus on 'the today,' Living ones life in accordance with God's directions, being his people. Christianity by comparison does the same but it also has a much higher focus on the saving Grace of God and the life hereafter. Judaism expects a life hereafter, but it is in the future when the Messiah comes.

There is a belief that when the Messiah returns he will ride out of the Golden Gate of Jerusalem and those that are buried in front of the gate will arise and be part of his glory on this earth. That is why there are cemeteries in front of the gate. There is also, incidentally, a Muslim cemetery there. This is to stop the Messiah riding forth, so even in death Muslims can still fight for their faith.

So for the Jews, and the teacher, the writer of Ecclesiastes, the present is the main focus. This is seen in the Jewish festivals; they have always had many festivals and they go on for several days, even a week. There is always eating and joy. I mentioned Purim at the beginning; this takes place in February/March and is just for joy. All the other festivals have a reference to God and his works, but Purim is just to enjoy the present. This is followed by Passover, which is primarily celebrated as a family gathering when the Exodus is remembered. When God, with his mighty arm, reached into Egypt, the super power of the day, and removed his people from their suffering. He had heard their cries, he responded to the appeals for help, and he took them from bondage to a land of their own, a beautiful land flowing with milk and honey. They would be his people and he would be their God.

So when reading Ecclesiastes we must always have these other sayings ringing in our ears - I am your God and you are my people!

Let us look at our reading today - Ecclesiastes 11. 'Cast your bread upon the waters for after many days you will find it again.'
Soggy, days old bread - no thank you!

'Give portions to seven, yes to eight, for you do not know what disaster may come upon the land.' If a disaster is looming surely it would be better create reserves?

Is this what the teacher is saying? No! Invest for the future, give credit is the message. From other writings using our money and resources wisely could also be added. Being wise in this case is following God's commands, God's directions to healthy living. God invested in the Israelites when he brought them out of Egypt - he gave them credit.

Is this not what we are doing here in Christ Church? We are investing in our children, and in our young people. Not so that they will look after us in our old age, though that would be a blessing - both for us AND for them - but because it is God's will. It is 'being family.' It is also about 'handing on.' I mentioned Passover, this is both about remembering God's mighty saving works, but also it is about passing on the stories of God's love to the next generation. He is our God and we are his people.

Verse 4. 'Whoever watches the wind will not plant, whoever looks at the clouds will not reap.' Just get on with what you are doing, circumstances change.

Verse 5. 'As 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.' Is this true today? We have satellites and computer models and analysis to understand and predict the weather. We know much more than the teacher did 2 and a half thousand years ago about weather patterns. We know huge amounts about our bodies, we can scan the growth of a baby in its mother's womb.

We do know many more facts than the Teacher did, and we can predict fairly accurately what weather patterns, but the more we learn, we also uncover more questions. But the Teacher is not really talking about weather patterns nor about the growth of a foetus. He is giving these as examples we have finite knowledge and understanding, we have definite limits to our abilities to predict the future. But we do not need to worry because God does - we are his people, he is our God.

'Sow your seed in the morning' says verse 6. 'and in the evening let not yours hands be idle, for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well.'

This reminds me of the work we did here in designing this building, or rather in the huge extension we built just a few years ago. With Jim and Katie Garner, Hugh More and Keith Lang, I was on the building committee. We were charged with writing the requirement spec, developing the design with the architect, and overseeing the construction. We tried to ask the right questions; to look into the future as to what the church would need. We tried to create a buildings that did what we then did, would help us to develop as we wanted to develop and to provide 'possibilities.' We did our best, we did it enthusiastically, and, very largely, we enjoyed it!

What we did not know was what the future held - we went forward prayerfully and trusted in God.

Did our plans work? Well, it is all around us and I think the answer is 'yes it does work.' Keith did a connectivity model. Fairly simple for this building - virtually everything needed to connect to the entrance hall. Sounds simple and obvious now, but at the time it told us we needed to give attention to the entrance, to look at the size and the flow of people to the other rooms. I think it works very well in the various times and activities that go on here.

Are the all details perfect? Not quite! The PA gallery, for example, does generate a certain amount of groan, grizzle grumblings - they cannot hear what is going on very well in the worship area. We visited Bursledon church for inspiration. This is a new church which we visited, and they enthusiastically showed us the PA desk. Actually it was a PA cupboard. At the back of the worship area was a line of built in storage cupboards. One of them, when the doors were opened out, was a large and well laid out PA desk. Very smart. The problem was that when the congregation stood to sing, the PA person could not see the musicians! I could solve that I cried, we will put it in the roof. So we have a large area and additionally we created another store behind it. I think we did discuss the PA operator needing to listen to what was happening in the main worship area, but headphones was the answer. Unfortunately they are not quite the answer. Never mind, at least you guys can see what is happening!

The third example is the theatre poles. These are those poles in front of the PA gallery and are for mounting spot lights etc. They are wired for power. We put these in because we used such lights a lot in the old worship area and we wanted to continue those activities. They have never been used! All the activities that use such lights go on in the Wesley Hall - our old worship area.

So three examples - one where things have worked out well, one where some things could have been better and one which has not been used at all. We did these things, under God, and doing them with the best of intentions and as professionally as we could. BUT, we did not know whether they would actually work well, that they would actually be used. The Teacher in Ecclesiastes warns us of this. However he then goes on in verses 7 to 10 that we should be happy and be joyful in doing these things.

He says, Light is sweet...

Let a man enjoy all his years....

Be happy... let your heart give you joy....banish anxiety from your heart - don't worry!

See though at the end of verse 9, the Teacher reminds us that in the end God will be our judge. Judaism may well be largely about 'today,' but it does not forget that God will judge us. Blessings and judgement are all part of the package of 'You are my people and I am your God.'

So far, under the title of Living for Today? I have our activities, our doings. Not really surprising as I am a 'doer.' But we are not all doers, we do not all have the same basic personality. When we did 'Life Shapes' we looked at one view of personality types. If you remember there were Prophets, Teachers, Apostles etc. Some years ago I went on another personality course. This was the Enneagram, but the model is not important. There was a lady on the course who found it very challenging and not a little upsetting. You see she had grown up in a vicarage and then she had become the wife of a vicar. As such, society and the church just expected her to be a 'helper.' Someone who always took her turn on the flower rota, who made cakes and visited the sick. I am sure you get the picture. Her and her husband were planning their retirement when unfortunately her husband died suddenly. Shades of Ecclesiastes! So there she was not only having been bereaved, but also having to move home as well.

It was at this time that I met her on the personality course. Here she found she was not basically a helper. The role she had played for 60 years as a daughter and then as a wife was not her. We all found the weekend challenging, but for her it seemed a disaster.

Some 9 months later I went on a follow-up course and there was the same lady. This time she was radiant, lively, joy was in her heart.

She had moved from lovely Dorset to inner Portsmouth - ugh!

She had moved from a healthy parish church to a cathedral - ugh!

She had said 'no,' to all requests to join the flower rota, and all the other activities when she had joined the cathedral congregation. She had taken her time to look around and to pray, and then she had decided what she would be involved with. She had taken charge of her life! She was who she was.

The ughs to Portsmouth and to the cathedral just reflect my view of where I wish to be, and I am sure the lady enjoyed flower arrangements even if she didn't like to do them herself. The important thing is that she had taken time to understand herself, to talk with Jesus as to what he wanted her to do, and then to take charge of her life, under God. Result - she was enjoying life.

When looking for guidance from the Hebrew Scripture, I usually want to check out the message with the NT, to make sure I understand the Scriptures as Jesus wants me to. In the NT passage chosen, Paul's 1st. letter to the Corinthians, he says, verse 10, 'I am what I am.' He looks at what he does; paraphrasing it he says he preaches Jesus' death for our sins, his descent into hell and his resurrection. Jesus often taught in parables - stories. Paul never does, he is what he is, and he sticks to it.

Is Paul being selfish, doing his own thing? He says he worked harder than all the other apostles. Is this being bigheaded? I feel Paul is just been realistically objective, for he lays stress on how he does these things 'By the Grace of God.'

To sum up then,

Enjoy work, keep busy.

Don't expect too much from what you do.

Do different things.

Find yourself, be yourself

Enjoy life.

Know it comes from God.