

Vanity of vanities! Ecclesiastes ch.1

Vanity of vanities says the Teacher. Vanity of vanities! All is vanity. I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind. (Ecclesiastes 1: 2 & 14).

What is this wisdom? Is all human thought and action ultimately futile? Is this what we believe?

What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 1: 9)

What is this wisdom? Does history merely repeat itself over and over again? Is humanity going round in circles? Is this what we think is happening?

For the next two weeks we will be reflecting on the wisdom of the Book of Ecclesiastes. It is a remarkable book that strikes a rather discordant note with much of our other sacred texts. So the question will arise: is it consistent with our faith? And if it is not consistent, what is it doing in the Bible?

Because if all human thought and action is ultimately futile why do so many other parts of Scripture examine the human response to God's activity in the world? Jesus heals the sick and tells people that it is their faith that has made them whole. Moses passes the commandments onto the people in the wilderness and they are expected to follow them. In these texts, human thought and action really do matter. Human thought and faith and action are not all vanity and chasing after wind.

And the history of humanity is most definitely not the same thing happening over and over again. Isaiah 43: 18-19 reads '*Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?*'. The prophet calls on the people to see the new thing that God is doing in the world. And they should be used to it. From the dawn of time God has been doing new things. Even the ancient story of the flood ends with a new covenant, a new promise from God. And the New Testament is, of course, all about the new game-changing event that is the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Christ and preparing us for his coming again among us. So, yes, there are new things to see under the sun.

And yet, I am pleased that Ecclesiastes is in the Bible and I am happy that we are

reflecting on it over these next two weeks. It is when we let go of our assumption that it is human thought and action that makes the critical difference in the world, that we see more clearly the action of God in the world. It is when we acknowledge the futility of so many human efforts to change the world that we learn the value of waiting for God's future for humanity. And these are things we can usefully spend some time meditating on now.

Since the pandemic started, we have all had to spend a lot more time thinking through many everyday actions to decide whether they are legally permitted, advisable or morally right. And it has been exhausting.

And when we go to work, or make decisions as part of a family or when we have been faced with decisions to make as a church we have to talk things through with others. Their opinions do not always chime with ours. And that's all stressful too.

And then we look into the world and we see people behaving in ways which are not the way we would have them behave. And our news is dominated every day by debates about whether the leaders of the world are making the right decisions for us and we are left wondering what their failures might mean for us and for our loved ones.

At the moment there is a group of countries in East Asia and the Pacific Rim; countries as varied as New Zealand, China and the Solomon Islands where the virus is effectively under control. Each country in this region only has a handful of cases. Life is going on pretty much as normal. The economic fall-out has been relatively mild or even non-existent. The only major issues are those that stem from having very strict quarantine controls on people travelling into their countries.

Our country, along with most of the rest of Europe, has followed a different strategy which has led to far higher death rates and far more economic dislocation. The one great positive in our national response to the pandemic has been the rapid procurement and roll-out of vaccines. Which is why the news about new strains of the virus that may require new vaccines to be developed is so very worrying.

If it does indeed turn out that we need to wait a few more months for a vaccine that is effective against the new strains of the virus we may be looking at a third peak in cases and a fourth lockdown later this year with high death rates and further economic and social meltdown while the virus continues to spread among us and mutates into yet another strain which requires yet another vaccine. Then we will truly know what it means to be chasing after wind. And at this point we will see power shift decisively

to those nations who have successfully protected their populations.

This hasn't happened yet. Maybe the vaccines we have will be effective with the new strains.

But ...

If our hopes and prayers for the efficacy of the vaccines are disappointed, we will need to find hope somewhere. And the Book of Ecclesiastes does contain hope. It finds hope in the wisdom that God is in control even when we discover to our horror that the control we thought we had was an illusion. It is a wisdom to be found in the eternal God even when we fail to discern any progress in human history. The Book of Ecclesiastes does not tell the whole story. But it is a text that leads us to a place where we can rest our thoughts when all around us we see nothing but vanity and a chasing after wind.

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