

Trapped in the pleasure dome: Ecclesiastes

ch.2

I said to myself, "Come now, I will make a test of pleasure; enjoy yourself." What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity. There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. For this also, I saw, is from the hand of God; for apart from him, who can eat or who can have enjoyment?

The book of Ecclesiastes seems an odd choice in some ways for our daily readings in these tragic times. It reminds me a little bit of a huge graffito that appeared on a stone wall in Radcliffe Square when I was a student in Oxford. GLOOM DESPAIR FRENZY, it proclaimed in in 3 ft high letters: FREE SOCIALISM. I still don't know how to read the syntax of that sentence, or whether the last part is meant to be part of the problem or part of the solution (well — it was the Sixties ...!). I just felt happy for whoever took the trouble to write it and hoped he felt a lot better after getting that off his chest.

In Xanadu did Kublai Khan a stately pleasure dome decree ..

The writer of Ecclesiastes is imagining what it must be like to be King Solomon building up his palace in Jerusalem: fabulously wealthy, famously wise, every pleasure of mind or body available at the click of a finger. From the outside, it looks like a fairy-tale lifestyle — like winning the Lottery, as we might say. So the experiment goes on — is pleasure the way to happiness?

Well, I guess plenty of people could have told him the answer to that one. We're all familiar with stories of millionaires and lottery winners who devote themselves to a life of pleasure — and find it's all vanity and a chasing after wind. The pursuit of pleasure for its own sake is addictive, like seeking a constant "high" — you find you need more and more and

get less and less out of it. Even more tragic, I think, are the people who have a real skill and a real job to do — like world leaders or footballers or musicians — but who get seduced along the way by the celebrity trappings that go with the job, and end up trapped in the pleasure dome, like Michael Jackson.

So what's the answer? Is it about keeping your feet on the ground, keeping a balance between work and play? The writer seems to hint at that in v.10: My heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. I think a lot of people found (I know I did) that one of the surprise results of lockdown was that when you lose the rhythm of work and play — when you have no work to do — it's impossible to relax. We can't enjoy our time off if there's nothing to be off from. It seems to be something about the way we're built as humans — we need work (that is, meaningful activity) in order to rest.

I would argue that there's a fundamental truth there. The rhythms of work and rest are embedded in the Bible's insistence on the Sabbath (Exodus 20.8-11). We often forget that the command to rest on the sabbath is only half of the fourth commandment. The other half is about work: Six days shalt thou labour and do all thy work. And this is built into the creation order (Genesis 2.1-3). God rested on the seventh day because creation is hard work!

Note that work doesn't have to be paid. Most human beings, through most of history, haven't been paid for their work — they've been working hard just to stay alive. Cooking is work, bringing up a family is work, running a house is work. Work can be something we choose as well, some purposeful activity that absorbs our energies of body and mind, something that exercises our creative instincts and gives a tiny sense of the joy and excitement that God felt in the act of creation — like King Solomon's waterworks and paradise gardens (vv.4-6). That's something that a lot of us found was the gift we needed to get us through lockdown — whether it's working on the allotment or planting a window-box.

But even all his work doesn't seem to bring the writer of Qohelet any satisfaction. He's obsessed about what comes next — about controlling

what happens afterwards (v.v.18-23). The true artist — in the kitchen or the garden or the study, wherever you exercise your God-given gifts of creativity — lives adventurously in the moment, finding satisfaction in doing a job well for its own sake: “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might”. It feels a tiny spark of God’s vast joy in the work of creation: “And God saw all that he had made, and behold, it was very good” (Genesis 1.31).

When God had finished the earth and the whirl of coloured suns
He turned from making big things to fashion little ones.
Beautiful tiny things, like daisies, He made; and then
He made the comical things, in case the minds of men
Should stiffen and become
Dull, humourless, and glum,
And so forgetful of their Maker be
As to take even themselves quite seriously ...
And as for the duck, I think God must have laughed a bit
Seeing those bright eyes blink on the day he fashioned it.
And He’s probably laughing still
At the sound that came out of its bill!
[F.W.Harvey]

So maybe (as well as feeling sorry for Solomon) we need to be thankful not only for having stuff to do but for the grace to enjoy it. I found a little book of prayers that used to belong to my mother when she was at school, called God who created me. It’s very dated, but there’s a lot of common sense in it, like this section on “Vitality and boredom”.

“A lark soaring joyously in the sky; two lambs playing together in April sunshine; a kitten chuckling over the intricate tangles of a ball of wool; a wriggling baby intent on reaching the far side of the room by any ingenious pioneer method; a forward line sweeping the ball up the field; a class coping determinedly with a mathematical problem; a poet or artist or musician, each creating in his own medium — such are instances of the vitality that is inherent in the whole of life.

A listless and cantankerous child with no interest; an over-fed, under-exercised, copped-up, airless prisoner of the flesh; a self-centred

snob, contemptuous of his fellow men; a human being so imprisoned by fear, conventions, self-esteem, over-indulgence and starvation of the spirit that life has become nothing more than a colourless monotony of boredom tempered by anxiety— these are instances of the way in which pitiful man has thrust aside life and chosen drab tonelessness.”

Comments on a postcard please! That was written in 1934 — but it strikes me as a very good description of the lockdown life that many of our children are struggling with at the moment. So let's pray for them — and for ourselves — for the grace to live adventurously, to find something of the joy of creation in all that we do. In the words of an old prayer (found on the tomb of Winifred Holtby):

God give me work
Till my life shall end,
And life
Till my work is done.

God bless,
Loveday
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