

Oppression, toil, friendlessness: Ecclesiastes ch.4



Some of you will be aware that I did my initial training for ministry at Wesley College, in Bristol. Occasionally we would go down to the old docks in the city and wander around for a while, or we would go into the city centre, past the statue of Edward Colston. Never once did I see the link between Edward Colston and the place where my parents lived, in Nottingham, Colston Crescent.

At times we can be quite oblivious to the connections with the past that are all around us. It has taken the Black Lives Matter movement and the death of George Floyd and several others, for me to see the connection and to see the connection with the slave trade and all that went with it.

Of course, slavery is not confined to the historic West African slave trade, there was also the East African slave trade with the Arabian Peninsula. But neither is slavery confined to history, sadly. Modern slavery happens in Britain too and is still happening.

Oppression, the thought with which this chapter opens, takes place on a whole variety of forms too, not just slavery. Again, it is present in modern day Britain. The writer to Ecclesiastes ponders this in his own context:

I saw the tears of the oppressed—
and they have no comforter;
power was on the side of their oppressors—
and they have no comforter.

In this fourth chapter he ponders how hard work, toil, is meaningless too. Then he considers lonely people, wisdom ... all of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

In our current context it can all too easily feel as if life has lost its meaning. We talk of being 'locked in at home' rather than 'safe at home' because that's how it feels.

Many of us, especially those who live alone, may be feeling really lonely and isolated, cut off from family and friends.

We may feel that there are all sorts of thing going on in the world over which we have no control. We talk of 100,000 plus deaths, rather than 100,000 people who have died. We tend to anonymise in order to be able to cope. Like the writer of Ecclesiastes we can feel a sense of hopelessness and insignificance and if we finish at the end of Chapter 4 that's where we would be. But there is more, later on in the book, to which we shall come in the next few days!

On Friday, Robin pondered on why we had chosen to look at Ecclesiastes now, and I confess that I was enthusiastic about it because it seems to me to be so relevant to our times. What I love about Ecclesiastes, and why I'm glad that we are reflecting on it in this period between Epiphany and Lent (a kind of nothingness period) is that the writer is deeply human. He is in the same kind of situation as we find ourselves in, he seems to be full of despair – but the book doesn't end with chapter 4. More will be revealed in the coming days, we just have to hang on in there for now.

To get to the wisdom that Ecclesiastes imparts we have to go through the agony of this period of desolation. Yet, as Christians, we know that in this desolation, God is with us- remember the anonymous poem, footprints? If not, you might like to look it up and take comfort and reassurance from the reality that God is with us in these times of difficulty, even when we may not see it.

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