

I am not sure what he is on about! Ecclesiastes

ch.10

Thanks to Anna for today's reflection on this puzzling book.

The teacher has been steadily building towards his conclusions- that spending your life chasing wealth, pleasure or status is like chasing after the wind; you will never catch them, they will only ever be temporary- it's all meaningless.

However, there is a light, at the end of chapter 9 he seems to conclude that there is something that isn't meaningless - the pursuit of wisdom. *"The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouts of a ruler among fools"*(9:17).

But in chapter 10 he seems to backtrack and be a bit unsure that it is the right answer (well, I think that is what he is saying in Chapter 10, The title of the chapter in the NRSV is "Miscellaneous Observations"- which tells me that they are not really sure what he is talking about.) He seems to just jump from one point to another and then contradicts himself.

He starts off strong with timeless truth: *"Dead flies make perfumer's ointment give off a foul odour; so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honour"* (V1). A modern version of this saying is: *"one bad apple ruins the whole barrel"*. All the wisdom in the world can be ruined by one stupid act. We know this is true, history is full of people who were put on pedestals to then fall off hard because of human fallibility or successful groups, organisations or businesses that have been brought down by one imprudent leader. Ok so far!

He then focuses on the fool- they think wrong and they act wrong (vs2&3).

He then seems to get distracted and gives a bit of advice to people who have fools as bosses; the advice is to just ride out the temper tantrums, keeping calm will help get it over with sooner (v4). He then observes that it is an evil in the world that fools end up as leaders (v5-7)- I think we can agree with that!.

But then, I think, we are back to understanding the fool, he lists some jobs and the consequences of doing them without wisdom, without a bit of forethought about the best way of going about them. If a fool digs a pit without a bit of preparation, they will probably fall into it. So he thinks wisdom is about thinking before acting.

No that's not the answer! because if you take too long to charm the snake, it will have bitten you before you get the chance (v11)! So wisdom is also acting swiftly when necessary.

He then moves on to foolish talk. A fool talks and talks, on and on, they tie themselves in knots, and it wears them out and consumes them (vs 12-15) and "*words spoken by the wise brings them favour*" (v12). That sounds like a proverb- that makes sense, wisdom =success and foolishness=failure.

But again no! He contradicts himself again. Right in the middle of that, the teacher points out that "*No one knows what is to happen, and who can tell anyone what the future holds?*" (v14b). We would like the words of the wise to bring them favour but we can't know that it will happen.

For the last section, he seems to be back on the topic of foolish leaders. "*Alas for you, O land, when your king is a servant (or immature, a child) and your prince's feast in the morning*" (v16). He has no problem with feasting (thank goodness) but just, at the right time- not in the morning. And feasting for the purpose of strength and laughter and not for drunkenness. If the foolish leaders are feasting in the morning they are lazy and not taking care of the important matters, like fixing the leaking roof before it falls in (v18). However, he recommends you don't curse your foolish king because some little birds might tell him (v20).

That is a whirlwind of a chapter! As Philip pointed out in his introduction to this series "*Qoheleth's book is not systematic. He circles round the same problem again and again, and comes up, sometimes, with contradictory answers. This reflects his own confusion and uncertainty as to where true happiness is to be found.*"

This chapter makes me think that the teacher really wants the answer to happiness in life to be wisdom and he is struggling with the idea that it too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. Wisdom is not immune to the great equaliser-death! Being wise will not bring lasting happiness because we can never be as wise as God. So though Wisdom is superior to folly (9:13) the search of it is not the key to lasting happiness....

...but the paradox is that there is wisdom in knowing that!

As I am not really sure that I know what this chapter is all about I will end with a quote from one of my favourite authors Terry Pratchett- that is my understanding of the point of wisdom:

“Cutangle: While I'm still confused and uncertain, it's on a much higher plane, d'you see, and at least I know I'm bewildered about the really fundamental and important facts of the universe.

Treatle: I hadn't looked at it like that, but you're absolutely right. He's really pushed back the boundaries of ignorance.

They both savoured the strange warm glow of being much more ignorant than ordinary people, who were only ignorant of ordinary things.”

— Terry Pratchett, *Equal Rites*

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