



The Psalms

Psalm 49 O hear ye this, all ye people

10 March 2019

The Bishop of Exeter

Ecclesiastes 12: 1–8 Luke 12: 13–21

I'm sure I am not the only clergyman in the Church of England who was given for Christmas a copy of Fergus Butler-Gallie's, *A Field Guide to the English Clergy*, subtitled 'A compendium of diverse eccentrics, pirates, prelates and adventurers; all Anglican, some practising'.

It makes for good bedtime reading. Among the clergy quoted is the redoubtable Sydney Smith, a Canon of St Paul's Cathedral in the early 19th century. Known for his caustic wit, the book includes several of his waspish comments. One barbed comment, however, which did not make it into the anthology has since been sent to me by an anonymous well-wisher in my diocese: 'I must believe in the apostolic succession, there being no other way of accounting for the descent of the Bishop of Exeter from Judas Iscariot.'

I don't know which of my seventy predecessors as Bishop of Exeter Sydney Smith was referring to, but it is always good to be affirmed.

Allow me to give you a bit of advice. If you are depressed, don't meditate on Psalm 49 or read the Book of Ecclesiastes. In fact I sometimes wonder what on earth they are doing in the Old Testament because they are both Odes to Melancholy. God is said to be inscrutable and there is no hope in the face of the injustices of life.

'We see that wise men die and perish with the foolish and the ignorant, leaving their riches to others. And yet they thought that their houses would continue forever and even called estates after their own names.' (Psalm 49, vv.10 & 11) And by association, called colleges and courts after their own names too, for that matter.

It's pretty grim reading. On the other hand, I do find such melancholy reflections strangely comforting. When I'm fed up, the one thing I can't cope with are relentlessly happy people who feel they have a mission in life to cheer me up.

In Jewish tradition, Moses is the fount of all law, Solomon the begetter of all wisdom, and David the author of the psalms. Except David didn't write this psalm because it dates from after his death. From the psalm's superscription in the Bible it is likely to have been written at least in part in protest against the arrogance of the Korah, a wealthy guild of singers and gatekeepers who held sway in the temple in Jerusalem.

'There are some that put their trust in their goods and boast of their riches, but who may live and not see the grave? A rich man without understanding is like the beasts that perish.'

So there you have it. We find the same theme echoing throughout the pages of Ecclesiastes. Although we don't know the identity of its author who is simply called 'The Preacher', most people know his laconic catch-phrase: 'Vanity, vanity. All is vanity'.

Of course, vanity is a 16th-century English translation. The Hebrew is *habel hebalim*, meaning emptiness, futility or meaninglessness. *Habel* literally means air or vapour or even wind. What is the point in life? the preacher asks. I don't see any. Everything is futile. Life is meaningless, a chasing after wind, a load of gas.

As I said, it's all pretty depressing stuff. But then again, there are things in life which are depressing. The author of Ecclesiastes points out no shortage of grim things he has experienced. I've known a town of sixty or seventy inhabitants, he says, good people, and a war was waged, and the town was wiped out. It had a wise leader too, but no one listened to his advice.

He could have been writing about an episode in the war in Syria or Yemen or, in a different context, lamenting the moral failure of our politicians to hear the wisdom of environmentalists about the danger of global warming. War, the slaughter of innocent people, environmental degradation: they are all terrible things that regularly fill our television screens. They challenge the best of us, including those of us who profess to be people of faith.

Bad things can happen in our personal lives too: a relationship or our marriage falls apart; we feel betrayed by a close friend; our child becomes terminally ill with leukaemia; we flop in our degree and crash out of university; we are made redundant and lose our job. Vanity of vanity, says the preacher. What's the point? I'm sure we've all hit rock bottom at one time or another.

When things are bad, what wisdom does scripture offer? Well the author of Ecclesiastes, echoing the sentiments of Psalm 49, has some unusual advice: 'Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.' If you ever wondered where that phrase comes from, now you know. Or to put it in modern-speak, 'I would go and get hammered if I were you'.

Personally, I wouldn't advise using that particular excuse if you are summoned before your tutor or director of studies for failing to submit your work on time, even if it has the merit of displaying your knowledge of the Hebrew scriptures. Interestingly, it's this very verse in Ecclesiastes that Jesus picks up on in his parable about the rich farmer we heard in our second lesson.

Jesus paints a picture of middle-age smugness. The farmer, luxuriating in his riches, builds bigger and bigger barns, and becomes increasingly self-satisfied. 'I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; eat, drink and be merry." But God says to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded of you. And all these riches, whose will they be?' This is the lot of those who store up treasures for themselves, says Jesus, 'but who are not rich towards God'.

The early death of the rich farmer in the parable is just the sort of event the psalmist and the writer of Ecclesiastes would have bewailed as evidence of the futility of life. But Jesus views the man's fate differently. He sees the man's covetousness as self-destructive foolishness.

For Jesus, our task is to make ourselves rich towards God. It is a spiritual quest that requires us to re-think our values, displace our egos from the centre of our world and put God there. Life is more than having a great time. Look outwards to others. Be one of life's givers, not a taker.

The psychologist Oliver James, writing of the ennui that infects so much of 21st-century living, says that as a generation we are suffering from the virus 'Affluenza'. Like the rich farmer, we've bought into the fallacy that life is only meaningful with more stuff, whether it's the latest mobile phone or a designer handbag. Such things are great, but they are the accessories of life and not its essence. They will not bring us contentment nor will they satisfy our need for love and companionship.

'Vanity, vanity. All is vanity,' says the preacher. Which is why we should hearken to his advice in our first reading: 'Remember now thy creator in the days of thy youth'.

Bronnie West, a palliative care nurse in Australia, interviewed her terminally ill patients about their regrets. Looking back, was there anything they would have done differently? she asked. Five themes surfaced in her research:

First, 'I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected me to live'.

Second, 'I wish I hadn't worked so hard'. This was a frequent regret of her male patients, many of whom felt they had missed their children growing up because they had become obsessed with their work.

Third, 'I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings'.

Fourth, 'I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends'. Some had let precious friendships slip and at the end of their lives were desperately lonely.

Fifth, 'I wish I'd let myself been happier'. We all make choices and many realised too late that happiness is a bi-product of the way we live. They had opted for the comfort of familiarity and settled for mediocrity.

We should take to heart the wisdom of these terminally ill people and not make their mistakes. We each have only one life to live. This is our go. Let's not fritter it away. 'Remember now thy creator in the midst of thy youth.' Change your life and priorities now, while you have the energy.

Unlike the psalmist or the author of Ecclesiastes, I don't believe life is a futile chasing after the wind. But meaning is something which we have to create for ourselves. And we do so most assuredly when we do so in partnership with God our Creator and Redeemer. I believe God wants us to be happy and fulfilled, but that doesn't free us from the risk of making mistakes.

So tonight let us pray for wisdom to make good choices in life, and for the grace to forgive ourselves and others the mistakes we make. Let us pray for grace to walk by faith in a world where sometimes bad things happen to good people. Jesus Christ walks unseen at our side. And when we walk in step with him as our guardian and guide we will never be overcome.