

A Sermon for the 18th Sunday after Trinity (7th October) 2007
Preached in Trinity College Chapel
By Michael Banner

‘Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth . . .’
(Ecclesiastes, 12, 1)

As he lay on what was to be his death-bed, Falstaff - so it is reported by Mistress Quickly in Shakespeare’s Henry V – ‘cried out, ‘God, God, God!’, three or four times.’ ‘Now, I to comfort him,’ says Mistress Quickly, ‘bid him a’ should not think of God - I hoped there was no need to trouble himself with any such thoughts yet.’

The writer of the book of Ecclesiastes – a mysterious figure, known as the Preacher, and according to certain popular traditions King Solomon himself – does not subscribe to such a philosophy. Shakespeare’s Mistress Quickly counsels Falstaff against thinking about God even as he is about, as it turns out, to take his very last breath – no sooner has she counselled him not to trouble himself with any thoughts of God, than the coldness of death creeps over him, from his feet upwards. The writer of Ecclesiastes solemnly instructs us otherwise: ‘Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them’ – the days he then evokes in the poetic and melancholy imagery of our first reading – the days of old age, before ‘the silver cord be loosed or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern’, when ‘the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit (or breath) shall return unto God who gave it.’ Remember thy Creator now – not on your death bed, not in old age – but now in the days of your youth. –

Well of these two approaches, which should we prefer? Will we go with Solomon, the Preacher – or whoever wrote Ecclesiastes – or should we take Mistress Quickly’s advice, not to trouble ourselves with God and our Creator yet?

Let me put the case against following the writer of Ecclesiastes first of all. It is not a very difficult case to make - and I can sum it up by referring you to the prospectus which was issued by the prep

school attended by a friend of mine, some 50 years ago. The prospectus stated that: ‘the school aims to turn out a manly, self-reliant sort of boy, with sound notions, good manners, and a cheerful and healthy outlook as regards religion.’ I think we can be pretty clear that the writer of Ecclesiastes did not enjoy the advantages afforded by attendance at an English prep school, since he has a cheerful attitude neither as regards religion nor much else. He is, indeed, a thoroughly gloomy soul. He writes great poetry – everyone knows the famous passage about a time to do this and a time to do that: ‘for everything there is a season, and time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted’. And he certainly coins some wonderfully memorable and pithy maxims – ‘better a live dog than a dead lion’, for example, from chapter 9. But the tone and content of this book is really rather bleak, so that one could say that it was a stroke of genius – or madness – when the lectionary (which specifies the readings for morning and evening prayer in the Anglican prayer book) used to take us through the book of Ecclesiastes from beginning to end in about mid-November. The readings fitted the season to perfection. So, as it might be, on a cold wet Monday in November we would read from Chapter 1 that ‘it is an unhappy business that God has given human beings to be busy with. I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see all is vanity [futility] and a chasing after wind.’ Around Tuesday evening – weather conditions: ‘scattered showers, falling, poor’ – we would be assured in Chapter 2 that mortals’ ‘days are full of pain and their work is a vexation’. Sticking with our programme of reading, Thursday morning would send us on our way with the message from chapter 4 that the ‘dead, who have already died, are more fortunate than the living, who are still alive, but better than both is the one who has not yet been, and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.’ Pushing on – weather conditions: heavy rain, falling, poor – and supposing we have not simply drunk ourselves to oblivion over the weekend – Monday would offer us the strangely almost cheerful, and seemingly out of character instruction – ‘let those who live many years rejoice in them all’. You just know however, that there is a ‘but’ coming along – and sure enough, here it is – ‘let those who live

many years rejoice in them all, but let them remember that the days of darkness will be many’.

Had the writer of Ecclesiastes attended that school I mentioned, one rather hopes that his housemaster, noting his somewhat gloomy temperament, would have encouraged him in a nice hobby which might have taken him out of himself a bit: stamp collecting, for example. Be that as it may, the writer’s determined dismay is hardly appealing – and we might very well think that given the choice, we should prefer Mistress Quickly’s healthy lack of trouble about God, death and the like, even in our last hours, to the misery and moaning of a man who probably needed to get out a bit more.

Well so much for the prosecution. What about the case for the defence? What is there to be said on behalf of the writer’s view with which we started, that we should think of our Creator now, in the time of our youth – or in the case of some of us here present, now in the time of our mid-youth or even late or extreme youth?

For the preacher, for us to remember our Creator is, in effect, to remember that we are created, and this is in turn to remember that we are mortal, that we are dust, and that we shall, as dust, return to the dust from whence we came. To remember your Creator is, for the preacher, to remember that you are going to die. But why, we might ask, is he banging on about this? What could be more obvious than that we shall die? We may be uncertain about when we shall die; we may be uncertain about how we shall die. But that we shall die – it seems a very good bet indeed; so good, that I doubt if a bookmaker would give you odds on it.

But there is this to be said on behalf of stating the obvious fact that we shall die, on behalf of holding it before our eyes – that though we know it in theory, there is a very good case for saying that in practice we live quite otherwise. We tend to live as if we shall not die, as if it is true that we shall die in theory, but that in practice we might just get away with it. How so?

The medieval moralists noticed, with great shrewdness, that avarice (meaning an inordinate or excessive desire for acquiring and hoarding material goods), was a particular temptation and sin of old age. Later novelists noted the same thing – the great misers of literature (Balzac’s Grandet, Dickens’s Scrooge, for example) are old

men. Now this is interesting because it seems strangely counter-intuitive – it seems odd that just as material goods are about to become utterly useless to us, we gather and hold them with more commitment. As the sureness of our grip on life weakens, so the firmness of our grip on the material strengthens. Just as we are about to part with everything, so we cling the more tightly to it. Not everyone, everywhere, all the time – but sufficiently often for these moralists and novelists to note and mark it. And we don't need great misers to make the point: it is perhaps sufficient to remark that the very aptly named will (that little piece of paper which seeks to project my about-to-be extinguished desires, my will, into the future) becomes, not just for misers, an increasingly precious object as the time of death draws near. It is to be pored over, considered, reconsidered and amended, in one of the few pleasures belonging almost exclusively to the elderly.

Well, why am I telling you this? My text is 'remember your creator/remember you are mortal, in the days of your youth'. And my question was – why does the preacher want to remind us that we shall die? Isn't this a truism of the same order as – the sun will rise, fire burns, spring follows winter, and so on? But what I have wanted to suggest is that if it is such a truism theoretically, practically it is not. Certainly not in the case of our misers – but the preacher's point, I think, is that the denial of death is not quite such a rare phenomenon as the phenomenon of the old miser. The miser's error strikes us all the more, just because the absurdity of using one's last breath to count one's money is obvious, if not to the miser. The preacher's point, however, is that each of us is prone to the same denial.

Our shared denial of death is hinted at in the often-noted hush with which we surround the subject of death. Freud remarks on this concealment, observing that it is only the very gauche (e.g. small children, fellows of Cambridge Colleges), who construct sentences which begin 'after your death, mummy, (or Senior Fellow, as the case may be) – I shall . . .' Even when someone is dying - even when they know that we know that they are dying; even when we know that they know that we know; even when we know that they know that we know that they know that we know – we mustn't begin 'after your death, I shall . ..'. It is verboten. It is taboo. It is gauche.

But we have to take this one step further. For we have to note that we practise this concealment very successfully, not just on others and lightly, so to speak, for the sake of politeness, but on ourselves, in a much more significant way. If we shouldn't mention other people's deaths, our own deaths we rather determinedly exclude from our consciousness. I could advance quite a lot of evidence on behalf of this proposition, I think, but let me mention one outstanding instance which makes the point for me. How often does some insistent reminder of the reality of death produce a sort of unseasonal New Year's resolution whereby we resolve to live differently or better? The death of someone very close; a surprise death, a disaster or a tragedy; a close brush with death – these often shake us, and cause us at least to think about re-ordering of our priorities. People resolve, after such events, to spend less time at the office; to give up making money and do something more important; to give more attention to their families and friends. But how very odd this is! Does it really take the random deaths of however many people in a sky scraper in New York, to remind me that I shall die at a time I know not when? Do I really need to see someone struck down with cancer in their thirties, let's say, to face up to my mortality? Is the certainty of my death only really certain for me because I was very nearly involved in pile-up on the motorway last week? It seems so – that is what the framing of these resolutions suggests. And, of course, their fading away just as quickly as they have been formed, reminds us that realism is a very fragile and delicate flower indeed, which blooms very briefly and in the morning is gone, and is replaced by the altogether more vigorous shrub of denial.

Just as the miser lives as though he will not die (and we laugh) – so we, the preacher believes, are prone to live as though we will not die – and yet no one laughs. Very specifically – and you must read this book for yourselves – the preacher thinks that we typically pursue a project of possessing the world which is as certain to end in tears as is the miser's. The changes and chances of the world are manifold – that is what that famous 'time for this' and 'time for that' speech teaches. And these changes and chances, these deep and ineradicable contingencies, mock projects of possession in various ways – our efforts to possess goods, power, status or even wisdom, may not be

rewarded; even when they are rewarded, there will be no security in possession; even if they are rewarded, and we gain some security in our possession of what we want, we may find that desire disappears with the very chance of its fulfilment; and then, in any case, death will snatch from our hand whatever we have built up and accumulated, so uncertainly, and with such travail.

Well, to go back to where we started, between the heedless Mistress Quickly, and the seemingly gloomy Preacher of Ecclesiastes. I haven't concealed the fact that if you are simply looking to have a few beers and a laugh on a Friday night, you would probably be ill-advised to take this book with you to the pub and read out your favourite quotations to your mates. But that to one side, the important point is just that the preacher is not gloomy just because he is, or for the sake of being gloomy – his reflections on death are for the sake of life. He asks us to consider whether we live, absurdly, as if we will not die; whether, for all that we know it is true, we just don't really reckon with the fact of our mortality. He speaks up for what Freud terms the reality principle, against make-believe – against our setting our hearts on having and holding what we cannot ever surely have, and will only temporarily hold. He asks us to consider whether the goals and values by which we live really make sense in the light of our mortality – or whether, secretly and absurdly, we live and act as if we shall never die. And there is no time like now – in the days of your youth – for orienting yourself by the truth rather than by fantasy.

It is not, let me stress, that the Preacher wants to take the joy out of life. There is joy to be had in the world, he thinks, even when the world is viewed realistically: joys in fellowship, in work, and in bread and wine. These joys may seem modest measured against those promised by the grand schemes of our daydreams; they may even be less intense than the joys of the dying miser as he counts his money. But better modest joys founded on truth, than joys founded on a denial of reality and the fantasy of immortality.

Is this everything to be said about death? No. The meditative saint of many a painting holds a skull in one hand – that symbol of our mortality – but often has his eyes on a cross somewhere beyond the skull: the thought being that that cross has something to say to our mortality. It does. But this evening we might simply note, that it is to

our mortality that the cross speaks, not to any pretended immortality. Even the saint begins with the skull – so allow me to commend to your attention the advice of the Preacher of Ecclesiastes, that skulls are definitely good for starters: and that you should remember your creator now, in the time of your youth.