

Trinity VII 2019 (Year C P13 OT18)

Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

These words from the opening of Ecclesiastes give us a flavour of the whole book. Koheleth – ‘the teacher’ - gives us immediately a picture of the journey we are to be led on, and it all seems very pessimistic and uncompromising. In fact one could say that we should have braced ourselves before coming to church today because all three readings seem to lead to a pretty depressing view of life. Is this really the sum total of life? Vanity of vanities (or ‘Worthless, worthless – futility, futility’) -take your pick!

Then Paul gives us that list of things to put to death: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry), anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language. Phew!

To cap it all, Jesus talks of the foolishness of building ever larger barns for grain and goods, because we shouldn’t forget (as he reminds those listening to him) that death is unavoidable. I am also mindful that this Gospel reading is often used to lead to a full expository sermon on stewardship. I assure you that we won’t be doing this today! There will be an opportunity for us to consider our talents and gifts as a community next term, but I think that we can take away a message which is much more nuanced and positive than it appears at first sight.

Ecclesiastes is often regarded as the most miserable book in the Bible. It certainly is a strange book, and full of contradictions. For this reason it has long puzzled rabbinical tradition regarding its inclusion within the Hebrew Scriptures amongst the Kethvim – the wisdom literature of the Bible. Yet for all the contradictions and the strange musings of this book, the writer (Koheleth – the teacher) does point to the only certainty in life: death (and whenever I think of that, I am always reminded of Dean Inge of St Paul’s London, whose favourite topic for sermons was: ‘The finest thing in life is death.’)! However, I wonder if we look at the book in too serious a way. Might not the whole tenor of what ‘the teacher’ is saying is that if we base life on riches or self, if we spend our time obsessing over our lives, then we really will not get the best out of our earthly journey?

This helpful jog from Ecclesiastes leads us to our lives as Christians. How are we to look at and deal with the world? What is our calling as part of the Body of Christ to be within an increasingly divided and bitter society? Do we have a relevant message to the brokenness which surrounds us?

Absolutely. In Christ we are part of a new creation, each called to reveal the hope beyond all others which is found in Christ, through whom in this new creation means that ‘there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!’ There could be no greater gift to the world than displaying this new creation which is open to all.

We are called to lead our lives in a radical way. As I said, Paul uses his favourite device of lists of 'don'ts': *fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry), get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another.*

Although we have that capturing of the new creation in the unity of all people after these major and minor , what today's reading misses out is the 'contra' list to the first lists, when Paul carries on by saying: *(Col 3: 12) As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.*

These are hallmarks of the true Christian journey. We might struggle to fulfil all of these the whole time (as the Colossians obviously found – hence the letter from Paul), but that is alright, because we will always be works in progress towards the ultimate destination of our journey in the heart of God's love.

Jesus points out (and you can almost feel him getting annoyed at the question he is asked about inheritance) that there is a bigger picture. We will know people or have experienced similar questions, perhaps even over inheritance, but Jesus asks us to look at the bigger question of life itself. This is to do with choice. It is OUR choice over the way we wish to live our lives. If we allow the sweaty fingers of the vices Paul lists to become priorities within our lives, if we obsess over the minutiae of life, we will never make the best of our Christian calling: to follow and serve the one who calls us to be signs of the New Creation – Jesus Christ - and thus to be part of God's image in transforming the world. And God knows it needs this transformation – here and now. Our message to the world must to be: **'If you desire to be truly rich, desire true riches'**.



The Transfiguration Theophanes the Greek, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, 1408

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14, 2: 18-23

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I, the Teacher, when king over Israel in Jerusalem, applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind.

I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me —and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labours under the sun, because sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. 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.

Colossians 3: 1-11

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

Luke 12: 13-21

Someone in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.' But he said to him, 'Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?' And he said to them, 'Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.' Then he told them a parable: 'The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, "What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?" Then he said, "I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'" But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.'