

01/01/2024 Ecclesiastes 3:1-13 New Year's Day

Ecclesiastes is part of the wisdom literature of the Bible

- Wisdom involves understanding how the world is ordered:
- The wise person lives in harmony with the order of creation
- The foolish person disregards the order and works against it
- This is how Ecclesiastes starts:
- **Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.**
- 'Vanity': in Hebrew: *Hevel*: In the NIV 'meaningless'
- But the image: vapour; mist; smoke
- That which is there and then goes:
- That which is transient, which does not last.

What comes next is a question

- That sets the agenda for the rest of the book:
What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun? Ecclesiastes 1:2-3
- Here's how the question works
- All our 'toil' is 'under the sun'
- Everything 'under the sun' is '*hevel*' – transient, like mist
- Therefore, all our toil is '*hevel*' – it will not last
- What, then, is of lasting profit?
- This is how we have it, in fact, in today's reading:
- **What gain have the workers from their toil?**

Today I'm proclaiming Good News from God's word

- In this transient world, where everything is like mist
- That dissolves as the sun rises
- There is One who is not simply 'under the sun'
- There is one who gives us the eternal gift our heart's desire:
- Although nothing in this world will yield lasting profit
- Jesus Christ is the true wisdom from God

- And in receiving forgiveness in his name
- We have eternal life for our souls, and toil that is not in vain.

Now, Ecclesiastes is poetry as well as wisdom

- Perhaps that's one reason this part of the Bible
- Has been taken up in popular culture
- In music, and in the titles of many books.
- In our reading today we have a poetic description
- Of the seasons of life in this transient world

This is how this section of Ecclesiastes begins: **For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:**

- Again: being wise involves both knowing the order of creation
- And living in harmony with it:
- So, wise farmers read the seasons
- And work their land in harmony with the seasons.

In Ecclesiastes we get, in poetic form,

- A description of the seasons of creation –
- Not how we'd like things to be, necessarily -
- We might not enjoy the heat of summer or the cold of winter -
- But we get a description of how things actually are.

So we hear words that invite us to engage our imaginations

- And to consider how we live in harmony
- With creation, and with the changing seasons of creation:
- **a time to be born, and a time to die;**
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;

**a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;
a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.**

- Just like there is a season, a right time for harvesting grain
- So in life there is a time for these different human realities.
- In this text there is no comment on what is good or bad
- Again, it's a poetic observation of what is; of how things are

But it's from this that we then turn to the question

- That is at the heart of Ecclesiastes:
- **What gain have the workers from their toil?**
- If this question sounds familiar
- It is because it is repeated in its own way
- By Jesus in the Gospels
- This is one version, from Mark's Gospel: **For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?** Mark 8:36
- So: given the transient nature of reality
- And the ultimate profitlessness of human toil,
- What is the point of any action?
- This is what the writer says: **I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover, he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.**
- We are part of God's great creation:
- We have our toil under the sun
- And have a sense of where we have come from
- And where we are going without seeing our lasting goal.
- So the writer says this: **I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they**

live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.

- Here's one way to think about what is being said:
- A wise farmer can't make it rain
- But they can prepare the land to receive the rain fruitfully.
- Likewise, we can't create joy in life
- But we can attend to our toil in a way that receives joy.

Think about marriage: spouses make a mistake

- If they think that they can make each other happy
- But in living faithfully together,
- In caring for each other, and honouring each other,
- They can be open to receive the joy that is part of married life.
- This reality also works for music, or for wine, or even for sport:
- We can't force joy out of these things,
- But in receiving them in the harmony of God's creation
- Including receiving them with thanks,
- We can experience the joy God gives in season.

Of course in this world, under than sun, all is *'hevel'*

- In goes like mist in the morning.
- We can give thanks to God for all these things
- And indeed find joy in them,
- But lasting joy must come from that which lasts.

It is Jesus himself who is not transient,

- But is the same yesterday, today, and forever.
- He is the one who gives lasting profit with God,
- So that whatever is done in his name is never done in vain.
- As we go into the new year, let's receive Jesus
- According to his word, and find that peace and joy
- That the world cannot give, but which is God's gift to us.
- In Jesus' name. Amen!