

Homily for Third Sunday of Easter, Sunday 26 April, 2020

1 Peter 1:17-25

God's Lasting Work in a Transient World

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The Book of Ecclesiastes

Is one of my favourite books of the Bible

It sets up a problem, it describes a situation

That is at the heart of human existence

It's a way into today's reading, and it goes like this:

Everything under the sun is vanity

That is: everything in this world

Everything that we can see, touch, taste, smell, and hear

Is transient, it's fleeting

All our work is under the sun

Whatever we do: Whether we are young or old

Whether we are rich or poor

Whether we are wise or foolish

It's all part of this transient and fleeting world

Therefore whatever we do, all our work, is transient, is fleeting

All that we have done, will wither and fade like grass in the summer heat

In one, two, or three generations we will be forgotten

So we deal with a question: why bother?

Why bother working and striving in this all too fleeting life?

On the one hand, the book of Ecclesiastes proclaims

That God gives us opportunities for real and great joys in this life

Joys that point us to the reality of the eternal, of God

On the other hand Ecclesiastes functions to open us up

To hear the message of the Gospel

The Good News that God does work for us

That is not fleeting and transient

But that is solid and eternal

God our Father, by the blood of Jesus, the lamb without blemish or defect

Has ransomed us from an empty and meaningless existence

And has brought us into a community

Where we are free to show genuine and mutual love

A love from the heart that does not cease when this world does

Because it is built on the word of God, on Christ Jesus himself

Let's hear how the reading begins

If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile.

Now we Christians do call on God as Father

It is how Jesus has taught us to pray

And when we call God 'Father', that's the Spirit at work in us

Assuring us that we are sons and daughters of God

And that we have the love and acceptance of God

This also gives us a reverence

God is not a spiritual Santa Claus

He is the one who judges all people impartially

Something that we experience as we listen to our conscience

When we listen to our conscience

Then we know that something is wrong with us

And in our world: we experience that we are not truly at home

With ourselves as we are, and with our world as it is

Our true selves are revealed as God works his mercy in us

And as he renews creation by his Spirit

This gives us a reverence towards God

For this, think about the body language of worship

It's a clue: now, *how* we show reverence can change in different times

And different places: but *that* there is a body language of reverence

That is something we feel in our bones

So when we hear in Scripture that Jesus and the apostles

Sometimes knelt to pray, we feel that this is right

Again, body language is a *clue* about reverence

An outward expression of an inner reality

That shows itself also *in how we treat each other*

We're getting to this, but first listen to how the text goes on:

You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish.

God has ransomed us from futile ways

From living in this fleeting and transitory world

As if what we perceive with our senses is all there is
God *ransomed* us from these futile ways, the text says

Now the imagery here is that of being bought out of slavery
So the idea is that when we live as if this world is all there is
We are driven into doing things that we don't really and ultimately enjoy
That *we are driven into things that enslave us*
We can see this sort of thing in action in addiction
To things like heavy drinking or drug use, or wild gambling, or pornography
We humans can fall prey so easily to these things
But we can also see this slavery at work in things
That are less obviously problematic, but no less damaging
Like addiction to work, or even addiction to family:
Treating our parents or spouse or children *as if they are God*
As if they, who are mortal, are God
We need God to liberate us
And God does act to buy us out of slavery, to free us
And he does this not with gold and silver
Which by the standards of this world are lasting and imperishable
But in the light of eternity are fleeting and insubstantial
God frees us instead by the precious blood of Christ
By the forgiveness of our sin, by the cleansing of our conscience
By the assurance that we can approach the true impartial judge
And reverently call him 'Father'
Because he is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ
Listen to how today's reading goes on:

He [our Lord Jesus] was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake. Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God.

It's the message of the Gospel that turns us back to God
The message that Christ, who gave his life to take away our sin
Lives in glory with the Father and the Spirit
And calls us to share in the life of community of God
Listen to the Gospel: God is calling you
Out of slavery to fleeting and ultimately empty things
And into a way of life that flows from real trust and hope

That shows itself in real love

St Peter goes on to give us

Who have been redeemed by the blood of Christ

Who call out on God as Father

He goes on to give us a command, a command that goes back to Christ himself:

Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart.

Love one another deeply from the heart...

Our obedience to the truth: our listening to the Gospel message

This cleanses us and makes us fit to approach God in reverence

It also brings us into relationship with one another

Think about how this was with Jesus in his earthly ministry

As he called his disciples to follow him

He also drew them close to each other

Through their discipleship with Jesus

They, who were of such different temperaments

Learned to love each other

And were freed to show the love that their master showed them

This is how it is with us

God has redeemed us *together*

As we approach God, we draw near to each other

We learn, we experience that we are brothers and sisters in God's household

And as such we have a command from God, from the true and eternal Father

To love each other

From the heart, our text says

In the modern world, the heart has to do with emotion and feelings

But something more steady and sure is suggested by the text

We are called to love each other from our innermost being

As an act of the will, you could say

Or with deliberateness and intent

The same sort of language is used by Jesus

In the parable of the unforgiving servant

When he calls us to forgive our brother and sister *from our hearts*

This, of course, cannot be done by human strength

But only by the power of God's word

His forgiving word frees us to forgive others

His word of love to us in Christ, frees us to love others

This is why the reading can end with these words:

**You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed,
through the living and enduring word of God. For**

'All flesh is like grass

and all its glory like the flower of grass.

The grass withers,

and the flower falls,

but the word of the Lord endures for ever.'

That word is the good news that was announced to you.

The word that endures forever

The word that breaks into this fleeting and temporary existence

Is the word of the Lord

The message of Christ, whose blood set us free

To be people of God

Worthy is Christ, the Lamb Who was slain

Whose blood set us free to be people of God

People who have been ransomed from an empty way of living

People who are free to live with hope and faith

And people who are free here and now

To experience the power of the resurrection

As we show love genuine love for each other

May God keep us in the freedom gained for us by the blood of Christ

Amen.