

Ecclesiastes 11, 12

On Monday I had a meeting with the Bishop. We had a conversation about planning for the future and we talked about things like strategy, and hope, and ambition. Then I drove just beyond the edge of the diocese to visit my mother, who is now 86, and rather less than fighting fit. We did not talk about strategy and ambition; we did not even talk about hope. Instead, she told me, as she tells me every time I see her, that she does not like being old.

From that I turned to the reading we have just heard

*Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come,
and the years draw near when you will say, "I have no pleasure in them"*

Ecclesiastes 12:1

Ecclesiastes 11 and 12 is, at least in part, about being young and about being old.

It is an odd book, Ecclesiastes, there is nothing else quite like it in scripture. Most of us know it for the famous passage in chapter three

For everything there is a season, and a 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; a time to kill, and a time to heal...

Ecclesiastes 3:1-3

Notice that too is about times and seasons, about the need to do this now and do that later.

a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace

Ecclesiastes 3:8

It is a presiding idea in Ecclesiastes. What we heard tonight was that when you are young you must seize the day. It was slightly startling stuff: urging young people to break the rules, to enjoy it,

Follow the inclination of your heart and the desire of your eyes

So, no surprise that in Ecclesiastes chapter eight we stumble across another familiar phrase, the one that, in the Authorised Version, reads

a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry

Ecclesiastes 8:15

If you think the phrase is 'eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow you die'; you need to know the bit about dying (after you have enjoyed the eating and drinking), is not in Ecclesiastes; that comes from Isaiah. Ecclesiastes it seems just wants you to have fun.

Now before we all decide that we would be better off this afternoon in the Dog and Duck. I need to explain that it is just a touch more complicated than that and try to explain what is going on here. It is unusual and it is interesting and it worth taking note.

Books of the bible were written at different times. The oldest are three thousand years old and there are stories in others that took shape even before that. The youngest books in the Old Testament were written not that long before Christ was born. These books, written at different times, were written in different styles. There are history books, there are prophecies, there are laws and there is much more besides.

Ecclesiastes is a very particular kind of writing; it is called 'wisdom literature'. This is the book of the bible to accompany a glass of very dry sherry. It is slightly upmarket, intellectual writing. Wisdom literature came out of the learned society near the royal court, clever sayings, thoughtful observation, the sort of thing you talked about at the best dinner parties in Jerusalem. And most wisdom literature sets out to tell you that being wise is a very good thing to be. The wise know the world, they understand.

Happy are those who find wisdom, and those who get understanding, for her income is better than silver, and her revenue better than gold Proverbs 3:13-14

What Wisdom literature tells you is that, if you do look around you, you will see the world makes sense and that you can be sure that God is good and God is just. That is what the Book of Proverbs says, it is what will also you find in the Book of Wisdom. Wisdom Literature tells the wise that they are happy and tells the rest of us to listen to them. The wise know how it all adds up.

And Ecclesiastes begs to differ. In Ecclesiastes the wise are not happy, the world does not make sense and the ways of God are past finding out. This is a radical, awkward, interesting book.

Ecclesiastes was written late, after the Exile when things had not gone well for the Israel of God. Ecclesiastes looks around and it does not seem obvious that everything adds up and makes sense. It does not even seem that God is at hand. Ecclesiastes is riven with a kind of nagging doubt. There is a phrase that keeps cropping up

all is vanity and a chasing after wind

Things go wrong, plans fail, we die, ambition will be frustrated just a chasing after wind. That is why our reading tonight was so keen on youth and so pessimistic about old age. In Ecclesiastes the more you know the less it all makes sense; the more you see, the worse it looks. Ecclesiastes can sound very bleak indeed.

So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a chasing after wind Ecclesiastes 2:17

This is the book of the bible that says what my mother says; knows what she knows. Pleasures pass and old age brings grief. It expresses its sorrow beautifully, but it is very sad indeed.

all must go to their eternal home, and the mourners will go about the streets; before the silver cord is snapped, and the golden bowl is broken, and the pitcher is broken at the fountain

Ecclesiastes writes out of an experience of failure and despair and it says something we have to hear. I have sat with my mother old age; old age is hard and her wisdom is that the world does not always make sense, and God does not always feel near.

Round about the time I saw my mother I finished the novel I was reading. It was the new Robert Harris, set in the conclave meeting to elect a new pope. The story gets a bit carried away with itself, but it is a hard book to put down. Without giving the game away, I can tell you that, in this book, a sermon is preached and it is a sermon on the virtues of doubt. The idea in the book is that a church that really knows doubt is a church that commend faith. The cardinal commends a faith that engages with doubt. Let's have more doubt says the preacher. Now interestingly the Book of Ecclesiastes is also known by another name; it is sometimes called Qoheleth, and Qoheleth means The Preacher. But this preacher, Qoheleth, is not quite saying that we have to live with doubt. Doubt is corrosive, if you live with doubt you live with anxiety and suspicion. It is a popular idea at the moment that doubt is somehow commendable, grown-up, thoughtful, but change the frame of reference for a moment. Imagine someone tells you that they love you. To respond 'I doubt that' would be deeply damaging. It is quite legitimate not to understand or comprehend how someone can love you, but doubting love is dangerous. Qoheleth does not ask us to doubt, it says instead that we have to live with disappointment and with mystery.

In part, this book tells us that we must seize our opportunities when we have them, for nothing is certain. Qoheleth confronts us with a God we will never encompass, describe and define. It throws open the curtains, pushes back the horizon, there is more than we can see, more than we can know. It confronts us with the height and depth of things, the mystery and the pain that unsettle us. That is a fundamentally religious lesson that we have to learn. God is more than we imagine, truth is not easily bought. The church does not preach doubt, but we are rightly humbled by the majesty of God and by the limits of our understanding. Ecclesiastes, the Preacher, teaches that lesson powerfully. We might want to say rather more than this Preacher says, but this is one of the things we need to say. And hearing it we are reminded that whilst faith might bring joy and comfort, might strengthen and reassure, sometimes it also invites us to be courageous and resilient. *When the golden bowl is broken, and the pitcher is broken at the fountain will still be faithful and still just.* But that does not mean that we will not have to acknowledge and deal with the fact that life and old age bring disappointment as well as hope and joy.