

Ecclesiastes 12
90th Birthday HMQ
Bristol Cathedral

In Washington DC, not far from the Lincoln Memorial, you can find the Vietnam Veterans memorial. There are two walls, recording over 58,000 names. These memorial walls are polished to such a finish that when you look at them you see your own reflection. It is deliberate, the idea is that you see the past, the names of the dead, and the present, your reflection, together; it is supposed to be a kind of healing.

Now let me take you to Canberra, to the Australian War Memorial; the long wall of the west gallery records 66,000 names of those who died in World War I. The names are done in bronze and not polished. But, there is tiny gap between each of those plaques and visitors push poppies into them so, as you walk along the cloister, you walk through a field of poppies. You do not see yourself. You get remembrance, the awkward past. You do not see yourself, you see something else.

Hold that thought about seeing something else; we will come back to it.

And let's turn to that rather startling first reading we heard. I have been a priest for nearly thirty years - it is the first time I can remember hearing it read in a service.

before the silver cord is snapped, and the golden bowl is broken, and the pitcher is broken at the fountain, and the wheel broken at the cistern, Ecclesiastes 12:6

It sounds familiar of course, that is because Henry James stole it for the title of a novel *The Golden Bowl*; and Bunyan took it too for *Pilgrim's Progress*; Valiant for Truth gets his summons to heaven with the words *the pitcher is broken at the fountain*. It is *The Book of Ecclesiastes* and it gets quoted a lot. Do not be fooled though, it may sound familiar, but this book is unfamiliar, obstinate, bewildering. There is a bleak refrain that keeps cropping up

This also is vanity and a chasing after wind Ecclesiastes 2:26

What on earth does it mean? *This also is vanity...* What it means is that there is something you may not have thought of, there is something else, there is something strange.

Pick up the bible and find the Book of Ecclesiastes. The Book before it is the Book of Proverbs.

A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. Proverbs 15:1
Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall. Proverbs 16:18

That is quite straightforward, it is actually quite cheerful, 'Here is some advice' it says, 'Here is something I can tell you: *Pride goes before a fall*'. And we feel as though we have learnt something. The book after the Book of Ecclesiastes is the Song of Solomon and that is very different, full of breasts and kissing lips. It is actually an erotic book. If Proverbs is pleased

about what we can know, the Song of Songs is excited about what we can feel. That's what the bible tells us and it helps, God speaks to us. in the gospels and in the letters; in the prophets and the law God tells us things. There is stuff you can know, there things you can do. In the world around us, in what you see and touch, or understand, you can find God. In creation, in love, in sex you can be sure that God is not so far away. The bible says that. That is the faith, we believe in a God who reveals himself. Yet the Book of Ecclesiastes says something else It is weary, it is cynical. There is something else, something more than knowing or feeling,

The almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along and desire fails
Ecclesiastes 12:5

... and the golden bowl is broken, and the pitcher is broken at the fountain (12:6)

What this book, Ecclesiastes says is that we will die, you and me. We will die not knowing some things, there is a mystery about life and about God that we will not understand, there is a difficulty in the world we cannot master. We can be clever, we can make plans, we can say our prayers, we can be the Dean and climb the pulpit steps even, but still the golden bowl will break and pitcher will crack at the fountain.

Ecclesiastes is realism, it tells us there is a limit to what we know and that is quite healthy, but it is more than that. One of the big temptations, one of the particular temptations when things are going half way well is to begin to think that you are in charge, you have bossed it, you are the man, you're the woman, you are in charge. One of the temptations, at least sometimes, is to think that the story is all about you, it depends on you, on what you do, on what you understand. The cathedral is full of the great and the good this morning, that temptation nags away, the temptation to take control.

But the story is not about you, it is not about the person next you, it is not about me, it is not about the Bishop of Bristol, or Her Majesty's Lord Lieutenant, it is not even about Her Majesty the Queen. And it is important we understand that. The decisive story we tell, the one about Jesus Christ of course actually hinges on the cross, but the turning point of that story is that moment in Gethsemane when Jesus says 'not my will , but your will be done'. It is critical in the gospel that Jesus gets to that moment, acknowledges that what he know and feels must be surrendered.. The story is not about me. The temptation to be in charge and in possession will mislead you, worse it will betray you. There will come a moment when it no longer serves. The story is about what God has begun and what God will conclude. That is when you know the pitcher is broken at the fountain. It is also why at the central moment of this service we come to communion with empty hands and receive what only God can give us.

And why, you ask, did we start with war memorials; what have they got to do with anything? Well, I do not think you should go to a war memorial and see your own reflection looking back at you. You are not the story. You go to a memorial to remember, to have something else put in front of you. You go to a war memorial to have the awkwardness of the past rise up before you and remind you that you are really not the story, it is more awkward, more challenging than you thought.

Which brings me, at last, to the official birthday of Her Majesty the Queen. At the celebrations for the 60th anniversary of the coronation we thought about her reign, we celebrated her life's *work*. On her birthday we think about the person, her life. And, what I

want to suggest, is that for ninety years she has done something rather extraordinary. She has shown us something other than ourselves; she has resolutely put something else at the heart of our national life. She has refused to be the story. Despite the staggering temptation to make it personal she has never wavered, *The Sun* might like to think it knows how she would vote if she did vote, but the truth is *The Sun* does not know, she has not said, she never says. She never makes herself the story. For ninety years she has fixed, in the centre of our national life, not a personality, nor a performance, but a better version of ourselves. For ninety years The Queen has offered us those slightly unfashionable words that get things done, duty, service, courtesy, resilience, dignity. She has embodied the words and values that make communities, that rescue the downtrodden, that get us from here to there: duty, service, courtesy, resilience, dignity. She has been those things and not made herself the story.

So Happy Birthday Ma'm and thank you, thank you for that dedication, thank you for that quiet and steady insistence that our fascination with our own reflection is not good for us. We need to be reminded that there are mysteries we still have not explained, processes we still cannot control. We need to be reminded that power and prestige will not see us through. We need to be reminded that the great conviction at the heart of our faith is not that we must go out and be holy, not that we have been told secrets that others do not know, but simply that we are not in charge. We do not possess the beginning or the ending of the story, we are not the story and we must learn the grace to look for something other than our own reflection looking back at us.

Our queen has shown us one way that can be done. God bless her.