

Trinity 9 2010

Ecclesiastes 1:2,12-14; 2:18-23; Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21

Ecclesiastes, from which we heard in our first reading, is a unique book, even by the standards of other so-called 'wisdom literature' in the O.T., like Proverbs. It never places itself under any constraint to balance negative thought with praise – something the Psalms often do with rapid transition – or with platitudes about God's provision or mercy. It's not the least bit afraid to pose philosophical dilemmas without pretending to offer solutions! The most positive conclusion our passage today seemed to reach was that *all is vanity*. But amidst all the protestations of vanity in the verses we heard was an easily missed statement: *'it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with'*. That sounds at first just as negative as the rest of the passage, but strangely it conveys a much more powerful message, that our main business, or purpose in life should be to make sense, with God's help, of *'all that is done under heaven'*; of the fact that He has put us here, with all the difficulties and contradictions life presents us with. This is the most important thing we'll ever do, and it's not something we should try to avoid.

Our Gospel just now took us somewhere along that quest, and there are echoes in it from elsewhere in Ecclesiastes and other of the 'Wisdom' texts. Jesus says *'Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.'* This already rebuffs the implied attitude in Ecclesiastes, that all is a waste of time because others benefit from our hard work; the values of the Kingdom of God, which Jesus says in the Gospels that he has come to bring, are entirely about working tirelessly to make the world a better place for those who come after us. Christian motivation and hope comes from bringing God's will about 'on earth as in heaven'; the abundance of life that Jesus promises comes entirely from making our wills united with his. It's the understanding of this motivation that many miss when they consider the Christian Faith. Rather than seeing it as a relationship with God through Christ, they reduce it to a moral code of 'do to others as you would have done to you'. When that code inevitably breaks down, and is not reciprocated, and the morally unscrupulous take advantage of them, *they* often reach the sorry conclusion that 'all is vanity', and become disillusioned and embittered.

St Paul, writing to the new church at Colossae, mentions greed himself as something to be shunned, and makes a further, very serious point: that greed, or literally 'excess' of any kind, amounts to **idolatry**. *'Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry)'* he says. Paul always

wishes his converts to remember the *new life* into which they've been baptised, and not to slip into any of the different forms of idolatry that separate us from God and deaden our responsiveness to Him. His teaching looks back to the great commandment running through the Hebrew scriptures, reiterated by Jesus - and recalled at the beginning of this service: that we should love God before anything (and everyone) else. It puts into a right perspective passion, relationships and all forms of desire; they are not sinful in themselves, it's simply that none of these must take the place of God – that's how God's good gifts become marred and dysfunctional. I'm mindful of this, and of the fragility of all life's good gifts every time I interview a couple for marriage in church. Will they appreciate that Christian marriage involves so much more than the plans they make for the wedding reception – more even than the hopes and expectations they invest in each other?

The Gospel ended with another picture of 'vanity': the man who amassed many crops and goods - only to have his life taken from him. '*So it is*', says Jesus, '*with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God*'. As Christian people, may we look to Christ for our meaning and our security, and may *his* life fill and enrich us.

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