

A Study in  
Ecclesiastes

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Bible Notes  
January – March 2013

50p

To study Ecclesiastes was the suggestion of one of our regular readers. (If anyone else has any requests, please let me know.) Ecclesiastes is unique in the Bible. To some people it might seem a strange book with which to start a new year. It is so depressing – unless, that is, you know God!

The name Ecclesiastes is the Latin form of the Greek word used to translate the Hebrew name of the book – Qoheleth. No one is entirely surely what that means, but most likely it is someone who speaks in the assembly or congregation of God's people. Hence *the Preacher*.

Verse 1 says that the preacher was the son of David, king in Jerusalem, and traditionally the book is thought to be the teaching of King Solomon. Modern scholars think it much more likely that the book was written long after the time of Solomon, but written in his name. Whatever the truth of that may be, it certainly makes sense to read the book as the work of Solomon because its perspective is his perspective – that of a rich, powerful and wise man, whose every need is satisfied and to whom every luxury is on offer.

It is so depressing – unless, that is, you know God! 1<sup>st</sup> January is the 8<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas. Great David's greater Son, the Wisdom of God incarnate, is circumcised to fulfil the Law and given the Name Jesus, which means *the LORD is our salvation*. He is Emmanuel, *God with us*. It is so depressing – unless, that is, you know God! *And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.* John 17<sup>3</sup>.

Almighty God, who madest thy blessed Son to be circumcised, and obedient to the law for man; Grant us the true Circumcision of the Spirit: that, our hearts, and all our members, being mortified from all worldly and carnal lusts, we may in all things obey thy blessed will; through the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

January 2<sup>nd</sup>

Ecclesiastes 1 vv 2&3

Do you ever wonder why you are dusting a room or cutting the grass? It will soon want doing again? Do you ever think when you're washing up, what's the point? In a few hours time, you'll be cooking another meal, dishing it up on these same plates, scoffing it and then washing up again? What's the point? The more spiritual among us might agree with George Herbert:

All may of thee partake; nothing can be so mean  
Which, with this tincture, *For thy sake*, will not grow bright and clean.  
A servant with this clause makes drudgery divine;  
Who sweeps a room as for thy laws, makes that and the action fine.

On the other hand, the more cynical of you might say that's just the sort of thing someone with an interesting job like country clergyman would say to encourage other people to do the jobs he doesn't want to do. If you feel like that, you'll have to fall back on practical points like, if someone didn't prepare food, we'd starve. If no one cleaned up, we'd all die of infectious diseases. If you didn't cut the grass, in a few years time you'd have scrubby woodland preventing you from seeing out of your windows!

January 3<sup>rd</sup>

Ecclesiastes 1 v4

If you're really feeling melancholy, you might start questioning everything you do in life, not just the mundane jobs like housework and cooking. You spend your childhood getting an education so that you can get a good job when you're grown up. When you've got a job, you save for a pension. You live off your pension through your declining years and then you die. If you've had children, they go through the same cycle. My father used to complain that just as you became old enough to start enjoying life at five years of age they forced you to go to school. Then, in the case of his generation, they made you give up your youth to fight a world war. Then they made you work until you were 65, too old to do a lot of the things you might like to have done. And then you died. If you look at life like that, it's even worse nowadays. Children go into child care even as babies and retirement gets later and later. Soon there will be no time left at all to do as you like. It is so depressing – unless, that is, you know God!

January 4<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 1 vv 5&6

One day follows another. Depending on your mood or depending on your character, you might be depressed by this apparently unending cycle or you might be inspired like another clerical hymn-writer John Keble:

New every morning is the love our wakening and uprising prove;  
Through sleep and darkness safely brought, restored to life and power  
and thought.

If on our daily course our mind be set to hallow all we find,  
New treasures still of countless price, God will provide for sacrifice.  
The trivial round, the common task, will furnish all we need to ask,  
Room to deny ourselves, a road to bring us daily nearer God.

January 5<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 1 v7

Providence of futility? The rivers run down to the oceans. The warmth of the sun causes the water to evaporate and form rain clouds. The salt is left behind in the sea. The wind blows the clouds and rain falls to water the earth. Plants grow. Animals thrive. Human life is made possible. To those of us who know God, this is amazing Providence at work. But maybe to those who do not know God, it is futility. Water goes round and round the cycle – ocean, sky, rain, river, ocean. The life it brings dies. *Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.* What is the point unless you have *the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life.*

January 6<sup>th</sup> Epiphany

Ecclesiastes 1 v8

*The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the eye with hearing.*

Epiphany means manifestation or revelation. The wise men saw the infant Jesus. They heard His cries. Nothing created can satisfy but Jesus meets all our human need.

O God, who by the leading of a star didst manifest thy only-begotten Son to the Gentiles, Mercifully grant, that we, which know thee now by faith, may after this life have the fruition of thy glorious Godhead; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

January 7<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 1 vv 9&10

*There is no new thing under the sun.*

This is one of those biblical sayings which has entered common parlance. Or was it already a common observation when it was included in the bible? In a banal sense it isn't true. For example, there were no buses in biblical times, but there are now. So buses are something new. But in principle, life tends to be the *same old same old*. We still have to get from one place to another. In fact it is quite depressing reading the bible each day and reading accounts of wars and conflicts in the world in those days just as there are in the world today – sadly only too often in the same places. Human nature remains the same and the opportunities and challenges faced by each generation remain the same. Swords or ploughshares? Nuclear weapons or combine harvesters? The details differ, but the essential point is the same. In many ways we have reason to celebrate human progress. Apparently, for example, crime figures are falling throughout the civilised world. On the other hand, we can never be complacent. Nazi Germany is a reminder of what a highly civilised apparently Christian nation can so easily become. If you didn't believe in the God of Israel, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, you might be depressed by what appears to be an endless cycle of sameness repeating itself. However the insight of faith is that it is God's world. The eternal truth contained in the Scriptures is valid in every generation. Heaven and earth are not locked in an everlasting cycle of futility. Heaven and earth shall pass away and there will be a new creation in which righteousness dwells. (II Peter 3<sup>13</sup>).

January 8<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 1 v11

Memorials can be a trial for vicars. Sometimes we get into awkward disputes with people who insist on gravestones which are not permitted by the churchyard regulations. Inevitably there comes a time when the people they commemorate are forgotten and memorials decay, become illegible, sometimes unsightly and occasionally a risk to health and safety. We don't like the thought of not being remembered, but few of us are remembered on earth for more than a few decades. What really matters, however, is not what kind of monuments people erect for us on earth, but *that our names are written in heaven*. Luke 10<sup>20</sup>).

January 9<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 1 vv 12-14

Solomon was in a good position to form a judgment as to what life was all about. He was blessed with the gift of wisdom. He looked at things from the top of the tree. He was king over Israel in Jerusalem. And his conclusion was *this sore travail hath God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith*. It makes me think of the Garden of Eden. Because the man Adam rebelled against God he was to live only by the sweat of his brow. Because he rebelled against the Creator, creation was no longer his friend. Instead of just helping himself to the fruits in the garden, living in unending harmony with God and nature, he would have to plough and sow, reap and thresh. The earth would bring forth thorns and thistles. The end of a man's life would be to return to the dust from whence he came. Such the self-imposed doom of the *sons of man* – lives of futile travail ending only in the grave. But the phrase *sons of man* in the text alerted me to the good news in this story. *Sons of man* is literally *sons of Adam*. The Son of Man is the second Adam, Jesus Christ. What Adam lost on behalf of us all through his rebellion against God (in which we all participate), Christ has regained for us by His obedience to death on the Cross in which we also participate through faithful Baptism in His Name. Our work is fulfilled because *whatever we do in word or deed we do all in the Name of the Lord Jesus* and our end is eternal life in Him. In the words of another clerical hymn writer:

O loving wisdom of our God! When all was sin and shame,  
A second Adam to the fight and to the rescue came.

January 10<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 1 v15

I'm feeling very cynical at present about both national and ecclesiastical politics. The problems confronting both Church and state are enormous. I doubt that any politicians or church leaders have the solutions to them and, if they had, I feel sure that they would never be allowed by parliament, synod, bureaucracy, the press and the general public to put their plans into operation. *That which is crooked cannot be made straight*. But that is to leave God out of the equation. *With men it is impossible, but not with God: for with God all things are possible*. (Mark 10<sup>27</sup>). So don't lose hope – one of the three great Christian virtues.

January 11<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 1 vv 16-18

Socrates is supposed to have said, *The unexamined life is not worth living*. Or so Plato tells us. Socrates and Plato were both foundational figures in the development of Western Philosophy. Eastern cultures too have had their great thinkers. It is human to reason. I like to think that this is because we are made in the image of the Reason for which everything exists. We are brothers and sisters of Jesus, the divine Logos. We are therefore logical – or at least we are meant to be. Reason has given us mathematics and science and law. There is reason in beauty – proportionality in painting and architecture, the mathematical relationships between musical notes. Art cannot address meaning without reason. And neither can faith.

Our intrinsic human quest for understanding is a foundation stone of our human civilisation. And yet, frustratingly, Philosophy, human wisdom, always eventually comes up against the buffers. Every human system of thought eventually reaches the point where reason is no longer enough. Geometry traditionally is based on Euclid's propositions and all the classic geometrical proofs follow from them, but you can't prove Euclid. Science depends on the fact that nature behaves with regularity in accordance with certain laws, but we cannot explain why this is so. We cannot prove that the same scientific laws always applied in the past nor that they will always apply in the future. The laws we are governed by are supposed to be based on principles of right and wrong, but how do we know what is right and what is wrong? How do we know that there are such things as justice apart from their being a concept devised by human minds for our own convenience? How is it meaningful to say that Mozart is a greater musician than Mick Jagger or that the Mona Lisa is a better work of art than *Kilroy was here* spray painted on a bus shelter?

At some point, you always have to make a personal commitment, to take a decision a step beyond where reason takes you. I just know that the speed of light in a vacuum will always be the same, the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, lying is wrong, the *Magic Flute* is better than *I Can't Get No Satisfaction* and that Christ is all in all. But what do I mean by *know!*?

January 12<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 2 v1

One answer is hedonism – the pursuit of pleasure. If you loathe going to work and only do your job because you need the money, if you are intellectually dissatisfied, and you can't really see much point in your life, one answer is to party. You might live for Saturday night when you go out with your mates. That makes up for six days of boring school or work, homework and housework. Shower. Make up. Dress up. A few hours in the week when you are set free by spending time with the people you really like, music and maybe alcohol or other drugs. Or it might be that you live for country walks or for cooking or embroidery or some other hobby or even shopping! The pursuit of pleasure fills the void in your life. Only of course, as Solomon found, it doesn't. The fix doesn't last and ultimately it doesn't work. If the only meaningful thing in your life is leisure, you are well on the road to being a nerd, a fanatic or even an addict. None of the things I mentioned above (except perhaps some drugs) is bad in itself. In fact most of them are good. But Satan perverts what's good and makes it evil. To live your life for something is to worship that something. It is idolatry. We human beings can only find fulfilment in worshipping God. Anything else is doom.

January 13<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 2 v2

Generally speaking, I like to see people laughing. Jesus came that we might have joy and it is good to see evidence that people are rejoicing. We were recently told by one of the Olympics games makers that some of them encouraged the crowds entering the Olympic venues to look as if they were going to enjoy themselves. Maybe the crowds going into church sometimes need the same encouragement. In that sense laughter is a good thing. But there is also cruel laughter – laughing at someone, mocking him or her, maybe even laughing while beating someone up or torturing him. And there is also empty laughter, laughing at nothing, sometimes almost aggressively as if to show the rest of the world you don't care. Laughter isn't good in itself. Laughing won't make you happy of itself. The laughter which makes you happy is laughter as an expression of love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness and temperance – the fruits of the Holy Spirit.



January 14<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 2 v3

Wine and wisdom. We sometimes call our quiz evenings *wine and wisdom*, but the two don't usually go together. A more likely coupling is surely drunkenness and folly. Yet the word *symposium* for a gathering together of serious people to discuss a serious subject actually means *a drinking party*. The ancient Greeks met to discuss philosophy over wine and that suddenly sounds very civilised. According to Psalm 104<sup>15</sup> among the gifts of God is *wine that maketh glad the heart of man*. Wine can have a good effect on us. Jesus would hardly have turned 120 gallons of water into wine if it wasn't a good thing to have wine at a party. Wine does comfort us and relax us and maybe makes the conversation flow more freely. What Solomon is talking about I think here, however, is the abuse of alcohol as an escape from the realities of life. That way lies irresponsibility, liver damage, anti-social behaviour and alcoholism. I can't help feeling that the scenes we see of drunken youth on our streets on Saturday nights is not unconnected with our failure to pass on to the next generation even the rudiments of Christian faith. It is in Christ alone that human beings can fill the void which so many seek oblivion to ignore.

January 15<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 2 vv 3-11

This is the nub. So far we've talked about ordinary people in humdrum jobs with limited incomes. Maybe we're not surprised if poor people feel unfulfilled and dissatisfied. If only they could win the lottery. If only they could have a more fulfilling job, exercising their own creativity rather than obeying someone else's orders. If only they could be musicians or artists. If only they could get fit. If only they could meet the right person. If only they could be important, giving instructions rather than taking them. If only they could be something worthwhile – a reforming politician, say, instead of a telesales person. But Solomon had all these things. He was king over Israel in Jerusalem. *Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and behold all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun.* So which should be more important in your life – schoolwork, earning money, eating properly, physical exercise, leisure activities, looking after your house and garden, dating, dieting or your relationship with God?

January 16<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 2 vv 12-17

I suppose Solomon here is about where the classical Greek philosophers were. The wise man is of more use to his fellow human beings than the fool. The fool is a menace to society. The wise man is beneficial for the whole community. The fool ruins his own life and the wise man makes much more of his time on earth and gets more satisfaction out of it. However, the fool and the wise man alike die and that is the end. With the passage of time both are forgotten and everything they achieved crumbles into dust. It is so depressing – unless, that is, you know God! This is where you need three favourite quotations, which were not available to the ancient Greeks.

*The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God. (Psalm 14<sup>1</sup>)*

*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom. (Psalm 111<sup>1</sup>)*

*And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent. (John 17<sup>3</sup>).*

January 17<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 2 vv 18&19

There's a little piece called *The Indispensable Man* in which we're invited to fill a bucket with water and then stir up the water with our hands as much as we like. No matter what waves we make, as soon as we take our hands out of the water, it goes back to the way it was before. So what's the point? What's the point in working? What's the point in living? What really matters, however, is *that our names are written in heaven. Luke 10<sup>20</sup>*).

January 18<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 2 vv 20&21

Suppose you do your best. You work hard. Maybe you're quite bright and you really make a difference. Then you retire and die. Maybe your children squander their inheritance. An incompetent takes over your business and runs it into the ground. The church or school you lovingly built, restored and built up is allowed to fall into dereliction. But sometimes it needs to. What the Victorians or the Tudors or even the early Church or even our immediate forbears in Cuxton and Halling did may not be right for today. We respect them for what they accomplished in their generation but what are we supposed to do in ours?

January 19<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 2 vv 22&23

It is a cliché that no one says on his death bed *I wish I'd spent more time at the office*. The implication is that the entrepreneur or celebrity would have done better to give more consideration to the things that really matter in life – family, friends, God, even himself. We are taught to admire and to emulate people who get on, but, at the final reckoning, what have they really achieved?

January 20<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 2 v24

You can look at this either of two ways. One way is to think of the person who just gets on with his life eating and drinking and enjoying the fruits of his labour as dull and selfish. He is living an unexamined life. He is not concerned about God or man or anything outside of his own immediate circle. Or you can respect the wisdom of someone who doesn't worry about what he can't alter, who isn't troubled about questions he can't answer and doesn't interfere in things that are beyond his capacity to change. Ecclesiastes very often leaves us with questions to ponder rather than giving us glib answers.

January 21<sup>st</sup>

Ecclesiastes 2 vv 25&26

The preacher seems to be saying that God has given him everything this world has to offer as a reward for his wisdom and that the fool, the sinner has had nothing but poverty and hardship, but that, in the end, it doesn't really matter. It's not so great to be rich and powerful. It's not so bad to be poor. Something else which needs thinking about!

*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.* Folly is akin to atheism. Thus folly tends to sin and sin to poverty because well-being comes from walking with our Creator. Yet Jesus says *Blessed be ye poor: for your's is the kingdom of God.* (Luke 6<sup>20</sup>). Jesus is another enigmatic preacher. He is the Wisdom of God incarnate. Does it clarify matters that in Matthew 5<sup>3</sup>, He is recorded as saying *Blessed are the poor in spirit: for their's is the kingdom of heaven?* My tentative thought is that it is prudent to obey God's Law and that to do so may well (but certainly not always) bring prosperity, but prosperity is not the point. The point is to know God and Jesus Christ Whom He has sent – eternal life.

January 22<sup>nd</sup>

Ecclesiastes 3 vv 1-8

These words resonate. They have even become the lyric of a pop song. I was surprised once to be asked for this passage as the lesson at a funeral but then I realised how apt it is and have subsequently chosen it myself for a family funeral.

Again there are two ways of reading these words. You can read them as futility or vanity. Sometimes you reap, sometimes you sow. Sometimes you scatter stones. Sometimes you gather them. So what? It'll all be the same in a hundred years.

Or you may read these words in the context of Providence. In the outworking of God's Redemption of the cosmos, certain things are to be done at certain times. If we live in harmony with our Creator, we participate in these actions – sowing in Spring, reaping in Autumn; demolishing the derelict, renewing the city; negotiating a peace, fighting a just war. God has prepared good works for us to walk in. Time unfolding provides us with our opportunity to cooperate with the Eternal.

January 23<sup>rd</sup>

Ecclesiastes 3 v9

*What profit hath he that worketh in that wherein he travaileth?*

I do enjoy this verse, partly I confess because it is such a tongue twister in the Authorised Version. For the same reason I am rather fond of Luke 12<sup>15</sup> in which Jesus says to two brothers quarrelling over an inheritance *Take heed and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth.* Jesus goes on to tell a parable about a man whose crops grow amazingly abundantly one year and he thinks to himself that he can hoard it all in ever bigger barns and tell his soul, *Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry.* God says to him, *Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided?*

Strange how these two tongue twisting verses – one from the OT and one from the New – seem to amount to the same thing. Not how God uses that word *Fool*.

January 24<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 3 vv 10-13

What this seems to me to mean is that God has given us an appetite for ultimate understanding. (Maybe this is why the pagan philosopher Socrates instinctively felt that the unexamined life wasn't worth living.) This would be in accordance with our being made in the image of God Who is omniscient and with our being the brothers and sisters of the Wisdom of God made flesh. However (because of original sin, our rebellion against God's perfect Law of Love) we cannot understand (until this mortal is swallowed up in immortality I Corinthians 15<sup>53</sup>) and that what we should be doing now therefore is to get on with what God has given us to do and to enjoy the many good things He gives to us. Life on earth is good if it is lived as a walk with God, but it pales into insignificance by comparison with what is to come. *For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face; now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.* (I Corinthians 13<sup>12</sup>).

January 25<sup>th</sup> (the Conversion of St Paul)

Ecclesiastes 3 vv 14&15

I've been asked to face a class of primary school children and answer their questions. One of the questions I've got to answer is *When was praying invented?* It's a good question and (based on archaeology and anthropology as well as the Bible and the teaching of religion) I think the answer is that human beings have always prayed. Scientists classify us as *homo sapiens* (which translates as wise man). I doubt if scientists thought of it when they selected this name, but wise men pray. And the evidence seems to bear this out. Human beings have always been religious. Atheism is a bit of an oddity in human history and even atheists seem to need religious rituals – humanist funerals, secular naming ceremonies, civil marriages. Life would be very empty without God.

What we do wrong is to diminish God, or rather to diminish our ideas about Him. As these verses say, God is omnipotent and omniscient and He is just. Everything that exists exists in Him and for Him and we are answerable to Him for our lives. Our great error is to behave most of the time as if God didn't matter and only to turn to Him in time of trouble.

January 26<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 3 vv 16&17

God is just, but there is injustice on earth. Sometimes there is injustice in government and parliament, where laws are made. Sometimes there is injustice in the courts where judgment is passed. Sometimes there is injustice on the part of the police and officials who are responsible for maintaining justice in the community. (You know how angry I get at officials who break the rules, tell lies and use their official positions to further their own personal interests.) And sometimes there is injustice in the ways that society treats the victims of injustice and the perpetrators of injustice. How can there be injustice in the world if the world is created and sustained by the just God? The answer of course is that He gives us the freedom to choose whether we act justly or unjustly. Injustice on the part of those charged with maintaining justice is particularly corrosive. On the other hand, as Lord Acton said, *Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely*. Those who govern and those who administer justice face particular temptations and bear heavy responsibilities. They need our prayers and our understanding. There also needs to be accountability.

In the light of recent events – MPs' expenses, the banking crisis, phone hacking, Hillsborough, etc. – many of us are finding it difficult to respect those in positions of power and authority in this country. Certainly blind obedience and unquestioning subservience on our part would do our country no favours. On the other hand, if we are completely cynical about the people who run our country, if distrust is our default position and we have no respect, then we risk becoming ungovernable. If democracy fails because we are unwilling to trust any of those who offer themselves as candidates for office, the other possibilities are tyranny and anarchy – neither of which is very attractive.

So I suggest we've got to get out and vote and participate in the political process. Bad as we may think things are, they could be very much worse as they are in many countries in the world today. The final point to remember is that we shall all have to give account for our lives before the Judgment Seat of God – from David Cameron to you and me.

January 27<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 3 vv 18-22

So what are we? What are human beings. Many scientists regard *homo sapiens* as just one species of animal. I pointed out, however, a couple of days ago that wise men pray. So what are we? A kind of animal or some sort of spiritual being. Of course we are both. Like the animals our bodies are made of the dust of the earth. From dust we came and to dust shall we return. We are animals. We also pray. We enjoy communion with God. God has breathed into us the breath of life. People who don't know God and people who ignore God may well suppose that we are just animals. There is plenty of evidence for that in human behaviour! They may well think that death is the end and that you might as well make the most of what life you have on earth, however long or short that turns out to be. Those of us who do know God, however, know that there is much more to it than that.

January 28<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 4 vv 1-3

Why is there so little good news in the papers or on the TV? The usual answer is that good news doesn't sell. We seem to like to read about things that make our flesh creep – murders and infidelities, terrible accidents and natural disasters, wars, earthquakes and famines. Maybe we feel sympathy or compassion for the victims. Maybe we're comforted that it's not us. We might want to help. We might want to demand that the authorities run things better so that things like this don't happen anymore. Whatever the reason, there's plenty of terrible news in the papers. Wouldn't very poor people or oppressed people or very sick people be better off dead? Or might it be better if they had never been born? Solomon seems to think this is a possible rational view of things. Faith is much more life-affirming than that, however. Where there's life there's hope. Where there are people in need there is room for love. We shouldn't be too quick to say that the severely disabled child should have been aborted or that the terminally ill should be offered euthanasia or that it is not worth trying to help the millions of people in the world living in dire poverty – to offer only birth control as a remedy for hunger in disease. In fact family size tends to decline naturally when living conditions improve and children can confidently be expected to live. Positive affirmation of human worth, of the worth of every human life, accomplishes much more than pessimism.

January 29<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 4 vv 4-6

We are very privileged to have the Bible freely available in English. In some countries, the authorities make it difficult or illegal to own and share bibles. (It's a revolutionary book.) In some places the Bible has not yet been translated into the native language. In some places people are illiterate or too poor to buy books. That is why it is important to support organisations like the Bible Society and the Gideons. Not only do we have the Bible in English, but we can also choose from a multiplicity of translations and I am sorry to say that sometimes this becomes a cause of conflict within churches rather than a blessing. Some people want to assert against other Christians that they know which version of the bible is best for everyone. A multiplicity of translations is a blessing, however. All translations are interpretations and good translations provide us with the interpretations of good bible scholars. You might find that different translations mean the same thing in English but that one is more meaningful to you than the others. You might also find that different translations not only put things differently, but that they say somewhat different things. This might be because there is a problem about the original text or because the Hebrew or Greek is especially hard to translate or because it could have more than one possible meaning in English. Thus you can sometimes understand a biblical passage better if you read it in more than one English translation. As many of you know, I'm a great fan of the King James Bible which I think is a reasonably accurate translation of a reasonably accurate text rendered in good English and which, at least for me, has the great virtue of familiarity. I do realise, however, that modern scholarship has enabled scholars to reconstruct more accurate texts of the original and to understand better the ancient languages in which the Bible is written and that some modern translations are easier to understand. I mention all this because I have been reading some of these Ecclesiastes passages for you in more than one translation. They are not easy to understand, even for Hebrew scholars, which I certainly am not.

What we have here I think is warning about the reality of keeping up with the Joneses (the peril of jealousy as a motive), the consequence of laziness and the pointlessness of wealth without contentment.



January 30<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 4 v 8

For many people, their aim in life is to leave something for their children. It is a worthwhile idea. Some people, however, have no children, maybe from choice, maybe because they can't have children. Then there are taxes and death duties (or whatever they are called now). Conflicting with our understandable desire to pass what we have earned or inherited on to our descendants, governments tend to think that it is unfair that a man may become very rich in his lifetime, acquiring land and property, and then pass that on to his descendants who may not deserve it while the children of poor (perhaps hard-working) people grow up in poverty and can expect nothing by way of inheritance. So we might work hard and amass a great deal of wealth, but if we have no children or if we are faced with crippling death duties, what is the point? We can't take it with us and we can't ensure that it will go to someone we think deserves it.

January 31<sup>st</sup>

Ecclesiastes 4 vv 9-12

In a way we're in more familiar territory. This is "classic" wisdom literature like most of the Book of Proverbs. It's telling something that instantly makes sense to us as soon as we read it. We're better off with other people than we are on our own.

February 1<sup>st</sup>

Ecclesiastes 4 vv13-16

v13 makes obvious and immediate sense. Wisdom is the essential. Whereas wisdom is often associated with age, it is not necessarily so. There's no fool like an old fool! Equally you might expect the man at the top to be wise. But an old fool on the throne of the kingdom is worth considerably less than a wise child or youth.

What follows is harder to interpret, but maybe a bit of history illuminates. At the beginning of his reign, Solomon was wise enough to ask God for the gift of wisdom. When he was an old man, however, he allowed his pagan wives to turn his heart to apostasy (forsaking God which of course is folly). A smart young man Jeroboam thus had the opportunity to usurp the greater part of the kingdom – Solomon's foolish son Rehoboam inheriting only the rump, but Jeroboam himself became an apostate and is not remembered kindly by posterity.

As we've said, human beings are naturally religious. They naturally pray, especially when they're in trouble. Very often they are superstitious. They like rituals. This is what we call folk religion. Fools might well love going to the temple and offering sacrifices. Sacrificing something makes you feel good (even if it's only going without dessert in a posh restaurant). The temple was an amazing sight to behold at the end of a long journey. There would be good food, music, good company. Fools might well enjoy taking part in religious rituals without ever considering what they really meant. The wise man might also take part in the sacrifices required by the Law, but he would recognise that what mattered more was to hear the Law. To hear the Law is to obey the Law, to receive the Word of God in the heart as well as the ear. What the Law was really about was living a peaceful life, honesty in business, generosity towards the poor, all that kind of thing. The temple was not just about going through the ritual, how ever impressive, exciting or emotionally satisfying. The temple was about lives lived in communion with God, walking with God every day wherever you went, whatever you did, at home, at work, at play, as well as in the temple and later on the synagogue or church. The fact that we can't get people to come to church in modern Britain doesn't mean that people aren't religious in the most basic sense of the word. People are superstitious. They believe in astrology. They practise rituals. They bang on about their own personal spiritualities. It is true that maybe part of the reason why they don't come to church is because our rituals don't resonate with contemporary culture. (Personally I sometimes wonder if we've made our rituals too banal and ordinary to satisfy people's religious aspirations, which might partly explain the fact that congregations are growing in cathedrals where you get traditional services and adult sermons, but declining in parish churches where often you don't). Much more importantly there is the point that people want spirituality on their own terms. They don't want a Jesus Who says to His disciples *Keep my commandments* John 15<sup>14</sup>). They want a spirituality that blesses them in doing their own thing.

Simeon and Hannah worshipped in the Temple and received the Word made flesh from His mother's arms on this 40<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas.

February 3<sup>rd</sup>

Ecclesiastes 5 v 2

Apophatic is not a word you hear every day. In fact I couldn't even find it in the dictionary. What it means is that you really can't talk about God. God is so far beyond that anything we say about God will fall infinitely far short. We can only be silent before the mystery of God. According to Jesus it the heathen who keep repeating themselves in the presence of God *for they think they shall be heard for their much speaking.* (Matthew 6<sup>7</sup>). We ought to know that *our Father knoweth what things we have need of before we ask him.* The holy Name which God disclosed to Moses at Mt Sinai is only spoken once in the year by the high priest on the Day of Atonement. Being human, I doubt if most of us could cope with too much silence. We certainly couldn't manage without words. Before I write this next sentence I confess to you that I find it very hard. We ought at least sometimes to be silent in the presence of God.

February 4<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 5 v 3

When we're worried we don't sleep well and when we are restive in the night we dream. Disturbing dreams are the result of fretting. In the same way a person who talks too much is apt to be revealed as a fool. How much is too much talking? It is never right to say anything bad about God or about other people. That really is folly. It is unwise to talk about things you don't understand unless you are humble enough to listen. It's silly to keep on talking if you're boring people or irritating them.

February 5<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 5 vv 4-6

It's generally wrong to make promises you can't keep – even to other people. Politicians might well consider this! Much worse, however, to promise to God and then not keep it. I realise that every time we say the confession we make promises that we don't keep. But at least we try, we seek the grace to try. *Grant that we may serve you in newness of life to the glory of your name.* God does understand, however, and works in us and with us to make us better people as we work with Him and in Him. I don't usually go in for specific promises – like I won't eat chocolate in Lent or I'll donate at least £10 to the restoration fund. If we do make such vows, however, we ought not lightly to break them. That's one reason I don't make them!

February 6<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 5 v 7

Prudence. Some people are far too quick to claim religious experiences as though it somehow made them special. In some circles people speak with far too much confidence that they are right, that they have the right to be heard, even that they are speaking for God. Humility and silence are virtues to cultivate. *Be still then, and know that I am God.* (Psalm 46<sup>10</sup>). In II Corinthians 12 St Paul describes a vision of a man in Christ. He describes what the vision said as beyond human speech. He refuses to glory in the experience. He even says that God sent a thorn in the flesh to save him from the temptation to glory. It is better to listen quietly for the Word of the Lord (to hear being to obey) than to seek spiritual experiences and is certainly wrong to boast of them if they are granted.

February 7<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 5 v 8

I hope we are troubled by injustice – whether in this country or abroad. I am sometimes shocked, for example, by the way this country treats its loyal servants: soldiers sent into combat zones without the right equipment; Ghurkha widows denied British pensions on flimsy and disgraceful legal grounds; Afghan and Iraqi interpreters denied the right to live in Britain though their work for the British had put them in danger in their own countries. We are rightly disgusted, but we should not be surprised. It is original sin. Human nature is perverted against acting with compassion by our rejection of the God Who is love. We shouldn't be surprised, but there will be judgment. Ministers and civil servants ought not to be complacent. We shall be judged for the way we conducted our public lives just as surely as for the way we conducted our private lives.

February 8<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 5 v 9

*God is no respecter of persons.* (Acts 10<sup>34</sup>).

The trouble is that we so often are, treating one person with much more respect than another. We adulate celebrities. We are in awe of royalty. We are impressed by wealth. Yet the king eats what comes from the dust of the earth just as we all do. All human beings are equally valuable in God's eyes. Christ died for every one of us. Whatever we do to the least we do to Him.

February 9<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 5 vv 10&11

I'm always amused by v11 when I read it. *When reaches increase, they are increased that eat them.* If you grow rich you may well employ servants and see your household grow. They need paying and feeding the same as you do. You might build a big house with dozens of rooms, but you can still only sit in one at a time. The more you have, the more responsibility you labour under. What is worse, people don't seem to be able to be content with what they have, however rich they are. You and I probably think we'd be content with another £5,000 a year, but the person on £5,000 a year more than us wants another £10,000. There are people, moreover, getting by on much less than you and I have. Maybe some of them envy us! Why do people carrying on amassing wealth when they've got more than they could ever possibly spend? Silliest of all I think are the people who spend millions on country houses, yachts and cars, but spend all their time in the office making more money they don't need and robbing themselves of the time to enjoy what they have. Original sin.

February 10<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 5 v12

I expect we all know the consequences of eating and drinking too much just before bedtime. (By the way, why is it that even people who don't have to go to work or school nowadays seem to have their main meal in the evening? A scanty or non-existent breakfast and a light lunch are expected to sustain you through the day's activities and then you fill up on fuel just before you lie down to rest! I'm not saying this as a Christian theologian, just on the basis of what I consider to be common sense. Such a lifestyle seems to invite low energy levels throughout the day, unhealthy snacking, insomnia and obesity because we feed our body's hunger just when it doesn't need food.)

We also know that if we are worried we can't sleep – worried about finishing that project, doing that deal, investing those millions. We sleep well when we are physically tired and not worried.

On the other hand we don't sleep well if we're actually hungry or worried about how we are going to feed our families. Moderation in all things!

February 11<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 5 vv 13-17

One way of reading these verses is to think of the person who grows rich by his own hard, honest work and then loses it all through no fault of his own. His warehouses catch fire. A dishonest clerk fiddles the books. Rampant inflation eats away his capital. He finishes up with nothing to show for his life and nothing to leave his children

Or maybe it's the riches which are the source of his trouble. He eats or drinks too much, takes cocaine, becomes addicted to gambling, crashes his fast car, falls off his swanky yacht, overextends himself in the good times only to go bankrupt in the bad.

Or he keeps his riches but contracts a horrible and incurable disease.

Another way of reading these verses is to remember that whatever happens, whether you grow rich or you don't, whether you hang on to your wealth or lose it, whether you are wise in the way you manage your affairs or foolish, you will leave this world with exactly what you had when you entered it. *We brought nothing into this world and it is certain that we can carry nothing out.* (I Timothy 6<sup>7</sup>), *Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither.* (Job 1<sup>21</sup>).

*So is he that layeth up treasure for himself and is not rich before God.* Luke 12<sup>21</sup>.

February 12<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 5 vv 18-20

Whatever we have comes from God. Some well off people might be tempted to think God has made them prosperous because they deserve it. This is a dangerous assumption. It is much wiser to recognise that if God has graciously given us good health, a nice home, a good job, a family and reasonable finances, then we are blessed. We have plenty of reasons for being thankful. We have the opportunity to use these blessings to do good in the world. Then we shall be even more blessed. Jesus said, *It is more blessed to give than to receive.* (Acts 20<sup>35</sup>). We have a responsibility to do so.

So be thankful for what has given you. Enjoy it and use it wisely.

February 13<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 6 vv 1-6

The preacher continues his theme. A man may accumulate great riches but never enjoy them. They might be taken away from him. He might not have the health or live long enough to enjoy them. Even if he hangs on to them and all the circumstances of his life are perfect in worldly terms – healthy, nice family, a respected position in the community – nevertheless material riches are intrinsically unsatisfying. Rich and poor finish up in one place, the grave. Where we shall spend eternity depends not on our bank balance but on our relationship with God. And so I bang on. Religion is not an optional extra after you've done whatever is necessary to earn a living, eaten healthily, been to the gym, taken care of your children, indulged your hobbies and done your bit for the community. Religion is the context in which you earn a living, eat healthily, exercise, look after your family, enjoyed your hobbies and done your bit for the PTA, the Scouts and the WI. So things like public worship, daily prayer and bible reading are not things you might do in your spare time if you get round to them; they are the *sine qua non* of your existence.

February 14<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 6 v 7

Sometimes if I took my grandmother out for the day we might be in the car or at some attraction when it would normally have been time for dinner. Somehow we didn't think about dinner as we might have done had we been at home at that time and would get home and have (perhaps a slightly larger) tea and my grandmother would say we had saved a meal. But you can't do that every day. You eat. In fact food is one of the main things we work for. You eat and soon after you are hungry again. It seems like a never ending cycle and if you don't enjoy your food and you don't enjoy working to pay for it, prepare it and wash up, it must be pretty depressing.

February 15<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 6 v 8

In the end, the wise man and the fool finish up the same. So what's the point? Live like a fool. Disregard God. Don't care about other people. Don't worry about the environment. Instinctively, we know that's wrong. Fool and wise man might have the same life. It's how they live it that counts both in this life and the next.

February 16<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 6 vv 9-12

These are difficult verses. What they seem to mean is that nothing significantly changes. Life is the same old, same old, generation after generation. Trying to make things better is a waste of time because nobody knows what to do anyway. You can look at it that way. Think of the last couple of hundred years of British history and the problems we have faced. Napoleonic Wars, Crimean War, Zulu War, Boer War and two World Wars, Korean War, Iraq, Afghanistan, to name some of the more prominent conflicts we've been involved in. Social unrest, mass unemployment, poverty, hardship, crime, to name but a few of our social evils. Epidemics of cholera, typhoid, Spanish flu, AIDS. You can read the history books and see how politicians, commentators and religious leaders argued about how to solve these problems in the past just as they do today. Had they been successful in devising solutions to these problems, of course we should no longer be facing them. There would be no more wars. The economy would deliver full employment and freedom from want. We'd be pensioning off our doctors and police. *Glass half empty pessimists* suggest that nothing really changes. We just have nuclear weapons instead of bows and arrows. So now we can wipe out the whole of the human race not just a few dozen from the next tribe. *Glass half full optimists* point out that many diseases have been conquered, that poor people today live better than rich people lived hundreds of years ago and that so far only two atom bombs have been dropped in anger. It depends on how you look at things! It is so depressing – unless, that is, you know God! If you know Him, you know that there is a plan, even if you don't know what that plan is. If there is no God, it's anyone's guess whether we shall use our technology to solve all our problems or to destroy the earth.

February 17<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 7 v 1

*A good name is better than precious ointment.*

I feel this very strongly. It is just so important to act with integrity. I was a bit surprised once to be asked to take the funeral of someone I'd often disagreed with. His widow said her husband had respected me because I always tried to be fair. I am proud of that and I think we should all be able to say that, that we have always done our best to behave with integrity.



February 18<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 7 vv 1-4

These verses seem quite depressing. I've never known anyone to ask for them at a wedding or a christening. I don't think that the lesson of the Bible is that we shouldn't celebrate a birth, a christening or a marriage, or that we shouldn't enjoy parties for special occasions. There are, however, three possible abuses of having a good time which occur to me.

If we are too keen on partying we might waste our time and money on fripperies when we should be working on something useful and providing for ourselves and our families.

We can ruin our health by partying all night, abusing alcohol and other drugs and leading a promiscuous life.

Thirdly, and most importantly, we can attempt to fill the void in our meaningless lives with parties instead of having the wisdom to seek meaning and fulfilment in Him in Whom alone our needs can be satisfied.

February 19<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 7 vv 5&6

Saturday night pubbing and clubbing or Sunday morning in church?  
Just by way of an example!

February 20<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 7 v7

These sayings are a bit enigmatic. Here's an explanation that makes sense to me, because it's one of my faults. It's easy to start something. We can be filled with enthusiasm for a new job or an exercise regime or a scheme to grow our own vegetables or to make all our own clothes or even a new idea for the Church – a youth club or mission services or a drop in centre. In our initial enthusiasm, we buy all the gear, hold a couple of meetings, maybe spend hours toiling at some tedious task like removing all the stones from the proposed vegetable garden or whitewashing the Nissan hut which we think will make an ideal soup kitchen. But then we get discouraged. We find we can't achieve what we'd hoped to achieve in anything like the time in which we thought we might see results. It's cold and dark in the early morning. Colleagues are uncooperative. The frost kills the green shoots. The council declines planning permission. We just get bored. *Better is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof.*

February 21<sup>st</sup>

Ecclesiastes 7 vv 8&9

St James says *Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: For the wrath of man accomplisheth not the righteousness of God.* (James 1<sup>19&20</sup>). Getting angry probably isn't good for you. It raises the blood pressure, speeds up the heart rate. Moreover it makes you careless. You are more likely to have an accident when you are angry. Sometimes anger does seem to achieve what you want. If you really look close to losing control, other people tend to back off. Shouting at children quite often works. So sometimes does getting angry with adults – obstructive public servants, difficult colleagues, recalcitrant board members. Very few people want to get into an actual fight. When I worked for the supplementary benefit office, someone who came in drunk and raving would usually get seen quicker than someone who meekly waited his turn. This always seemed wrong to me, but it made life a lot easier for the staff and for the other clients waiting in the waiting room.

But do you really want people to do what you want them to because they are afraid of you. Surely you want them to do what is right because they have to believe that it is right. Persuasion surely rather than anger is the way to accomplish the righteousness of God.

But what do you do when the naughty child won't listen to logic, some jobsworth is impervious to reason, a colleague is more interested in taking out his resentments on the firm than doing the job, a fellow board member is more concerned about the pecking order than the task in hand? I suppose you have to be firm whilst remaining in control of yourself and of the situation.

February 22<sup>nd</sup>

Ecclesiastes 7 v 10

I love this. Hundreds of years before the time of Jesus people were talking about the *good old days*. Nostalgia is by no means a modern invention. People have always been prone to think that things were better in the past, not least in churches. But the preacher warns us that we are wasting our time trying to recover the past. We have to live in the present.

February 23<sup>rd</sup>

Ecclesiastes 7 vv 11&12

Is the preacher saying that wisdom is a good inheritance or that wisdom is good with an inheritance? The Hebrew isn't clear. Money and wisdom are both useful for living your life, but wisdom is much more important than money.

February 24<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 7 v 13

*Consider the work of God.*

Here is the beginning of wisdom. Consider God. Everything that exists is the work of God's Hands. Our lives are held in His Hands. The histories of nations are in His Hands. He has redeemed us by the Death of His Son. He has given us His Holy Spirit. He has prepared for us a place in Heaven. We cannot go against God and it is entirely unreasonable that we might want to.

February 25<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 7 v 14

The preacher here seems to be saying what we said earlier. We experience good and bad things. Rejoice in the good. Learn from the bad. The ultimate meaning of it all is at present concealed from us. We live by faith, not by sight (II Corinthians 5<sup>7</sup>). All things are however in the providence of God and all will become clear in Him.

February 26<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 7 vv 15-18

Again this wants some thinking about. The preacher points out that the fool and the wicked may prosper while the good and wise may suffer and die young. The conclusion seems to be moderation. Don't go overboard in either direction – religion or irreligion. Do you think there is something of justification by faith in this? Paul the Pharisee thought that a man could be justified to God by his inheritance as a faithful Israelite and by fulfilling all the Law's demands. What he discovered in Christ was that God loves us all equally whatever our background and that we cannot be justified by anything we do, but only by what He has done for us. Some people may appear very religious, but that doesn't justify them in the sight of God. Only God can justify us and we apprehend His justification by grace through faith. It is only then that we can be transformed into the likeness of Christ and bring forth the fruits of the Holy Spirit and *do all such good works as He has prepared for us to walk in.*

February 27<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 7 vv 19&20

Maybe these verses encourage us in my interpretation of yesterday's passage. Wisdom is a very wonderful thing. Wisdom is rooted in the fear of the LORD. Wisdom, therefore, is keeping God's commandments. These are the commandments that make the world go round. There is, however, no human being who is so wise that he keeps all the commandments of God perfectly, except for Jesus Who is both the power of God and the wisdom of God, I Corinthians 1<sup>24</sup>). It is in Christ alone that we are just.

February 28<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 7 vv 21&22

And now for a bit of light relief. Eavesdroppers never hear any good of themselves. If you listen in on everything, you may well hear people say things about you that you don't like. You can sack your abusive servant. You can break friendship with your disloyal friend. You can harbour resentments against what people are saying about you. Or you can get over it. You can be sensible. You can remember that we've all thought and even said things about people that we wouldn't want them to hear. Do you want an overheard remark to destroy a relationship or are you prepared to be reasonable and swallow your hurt pride?

March 1<sup>st</sup>

Ecclesiastes 7 vv 23&24

Human beings crave understanding. This is an aspect of our impulse towards religion. It is an aspect of our endeavours in Science – all in all other fields of human enquiry. We need to make sense of things. We feel the need to make sense of our lives. From the C17 to C19 Science achieved a transformation in the way we understand the world: gravity and mechanics, fluid mechanics, the behaviour of light (optics), electricity and magnetism, atomic theory, the periodic table of elements, evolution. Increasingly scientists were able to understand the way the world works and describe its behaviour in terms of a few relatively simple mathematical equations. By about 1890 people thought they were close to understanding everything. Then radioactivity was discovered and Einstein came up with relativity and our understanding of the universe was shown to be utterly inadequate. We human beings have made tremendous advances in science, philosophy and all fields of thought, but, the rule seems to be that the more we discover the more we realise that there is infinitely more to be discovered – a never ending quest.

### March 2<sup>nd</sup>

Ecclesiastes 7 vv 25&26

In the Book of Proverbs wisdom and folly are both portrayed as women attempting to win the heart of a young man. A good wife can be the making of a man. A bad woman may be his undoing. Passion is a powerful force and needs to be directed by reason. It may be that the preacher is using the same simile here as Proverbs. Folly is like the sort of bad woman who will ensnare a man by her physical attractions and ruin his life. Or may be he is thinking of literal bad women who lead men astray. After all Solomon allowed his pagan wives to tempt him into apostasy, building shrines to false gods in the holy city. Passion is a potent driving force in our lives. Passions not only for the opposite sex but also the passion to get on in life or the passion for music or even passion for God are powerful motivators, but they need to be guided by reason if they are not to become destructive. Jesus is the Logos (usually translated Word, but obviously the Greek word from which we derive logic) of God. Christians are of the Logos (logikos). Romans 12<sup>1</sup> *I beseech you therefore, brethren, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable (logikos) service.*

### March 3<sup>rd</sup>

Ecclesiastes 7 vv 27-29

This feels like Solomon giving up. He realises that the way things are is beyond even his understanding. Understanding is closely linked in biblical thought to wisdom and wisdom to virtue. Solomon's wisdom finally demonstrates how inadequate human wisdom is. There is no one truly wise and therefore no one truly virtuous, man or woman. Yet God is simple. What He requires of us is simple. God is love and love is the fulfilling of the Law. We are the ones who have made it hard. Solomon of course does not know the story of Jesus in Whom God disentangles the knots we have made of our lives.

One of the questions I was asked by those primary school children was why don't people obey God's commandments. I told them that nobody does, but I was too tactful to state the reason as badly as I'm stating it here which is *Because we are fools!*

### March 4<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 8 vv 1-5

Certain books of the Old Testament – Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, Job – and parts of some other books – Daniel, Genesis, Psalms – are regarded by scholars as wisdom literature. The origin of wisdom literature is often thought to be in the schools in which young men were taught to serve at court. As is so often the case, the clearest examples are the exceptional ones. Nobody feels the need to write down what everybody knows about. The story of Joseph is often regarded as wisdom literature. Joseph learns from his experiences how to hold office in Pharaoh's court, but most civil servants go to better schools than the slave market and the prison and Israelite courtiers didn't usually serve Pharaoh. Daniel and his friends Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were schooled to serve the King of Babylon, but I am sure they would much rather have served a free King of Israel. More normally, boys and young men would have been educated in Jerusalem to serve their own king. A lot of the wisdom in which they were instructed would have been common to many cultures and not exclusively associated with the religion of the God of Israel – proverbs, aphorisms, general knowledge, a certain amount of philosophical speculation like why do bad things happen to good people. In the Old Testament context, however, God is never very far away. *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.*

### March 5<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 8 vv 6-8

Stress is one of the curses of modern life. Stressful people are often unhappy. They are susceptible to a whole range of mental and physical diseases. I doubt very much that stress is a modern phenomenon. I expect people have always felt stressed but we're all guilty of imagining that the past was somehow better than the present (see above Ecclesiastes 7 v 10). We tend to think that we are stressed because everything moves so fast these days. We are expected to cram so much into every hour. Or we have too much responsibility. But research tends to suggest that this isn't so. Some people thrive on filling their lives with bustling activity. Some people thrive on responsibility. It gives their lives meaning and purpose always to be busy achieving. What is really one of the biggest causes of stress is the feeling that we are not in control, that we are at mercy of other people or circumstances. Some things we'll never control, but we can always trust God, Who is in ultimate control. So we shouldn't feel stressed.

March 6<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 8 vv 9-11

Good and wise leaders are not always respected or remembered. Tyrants or fools (The tyrant is a fool in biblical terms) may receive honour in his lifetime and state funeral when he dies. This may lead people to conclude that there is no point in being wise and good. But to think like this would be wrong. *Virtue is its own reward.*

March 7<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 8 vv 12&13

One of the first sentences a child learns is, *It's not fair*. From a very early age we have an idea of what *fair* means and we believe that when we do good things we ought to be rewarded and that when we do bad things we ought to be punished. That is pretty basic. It's the way we expect God to run the universe.

The Old Testament starts from this premise. God's Law is just. Those who obey God's Law prosper. Those who don't, suffer the consequences. That is generally true. The world would be a much better place if people obeyed the Ten Commandments. You and I will probably do better in life if we worship the one true God, take a day off each week for worship and recreation, honour our parents, are always honest, refrain from violence, are faithful to our husbands or wives and don't covet what other people have got. But the OT knows very well that it does not always work out like this. Sometimes the wicked flourish and the good suffer. Indeed the good are sometimes cheated, oppressed and persecuted by the wicked. One answer is that it is all eventually sorted out in this world. The thief or murderer is caught and goes to prison. The tyrant is deposed. The captives are eventually set free. But that doesn't always happen either. *Virtue is its own reward*, is another possible answer. Even if the wicked is wealthy and powerful and the good person is poor, the good person still feels happier and more fulfilled. Another answer is that we shall all get justice in the world to come. Poor Lazarus goes to heaven and the rich man who didn't care about Lazarus goes to hell. But the message of the NT is that if we are measured by God's perfect Law of Love we are all sinners and deserve to go to hell. Our hope of heaven depends on God's mercy, that we don't get what we deserve. But if mercy undermines justice, what's the point?

March 8<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 8 v14

Old time preachers used to keep their congregations in order with the threat of hell. The wicked simply cannot come into the Presence of God. We are all wicked by comparison with God's standard, which is Jesus. We all therefore deserve the eternal absence of God – hell, whether that is interpreted as annihilation or perpetual torment. It is only through God's astonishing mercy that in His love for us He has sent His Son into the world to be despised and rejected by those He came to save and to suffer an agonising death as a propitiation for the sins of the world. Through no merit of our own, but entirely by God's grace, apprehended through faith alone, we may be forgiven and spend eternity with Him rather than where we deserve to be. That is pretty much what the Bible teaches, what both our old and our new prayer books preach and the doctrine we find underlying some of our greatest hymns and choruses – not just the hymns of the last couple of hundred years, but also the ones we sing at Spring Harvest and in the biggest, most successful evangelical churches. If we think like this, religion is very important to us. Church attendance is a top priority. Christian giving reflects our sense of what Jesus gave for our salvation. Belonging to the Church and supporting its activities – its social events, its campaigns, its missionary events and its social action – matter a good deal to us. It is no accident that the churches which are growing are very often the ones that still preach that old time religion. Where people passionately believe that their relationship with Jesus here and now determines what happens to them in this life and the next they will come to church even if it's raining or they've been asked out for the day. Tithing will be the norm. Church events will take precedence over the rest of a person's social life. The Church will enjoy a degree of commitment from its members which makes it possible for it to act and make a difference in the community.

If, however, we believe (as many of us do for good reason) that God's mercy will always find a way so that everyone will get to heaven regardless of what they have believed or how they have behaved, we may not be particularly committed to the Church and without our commitment, attendance is poor, finances are desperate and the Church has very little impact in the community.



March 9<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 8 v15

If the just and the unjust finish up the same, if the wise man and the fool prosper equally, if the good and the bad, the faithful Christian and the devil worshipper all finish up in heaven regardless, what is the point? Why not just eat, drink and be merry? Look after number one. Spend your life in selfish pleasure. Why care about man or God? If there is heaven, we're all going there anyway. If there isn't, all the more reason to enjoy this life as much as you can.

I don't claim to know the answers to these conundrums. I know that God is just and that we shall all have to give account for our lives at the Last Judgment. I know that Jesus will divide the sheep from the goats and that the sheep will spend their eternity with Him and the goats will join the devil. I also know that God is merciful and that He does not desire the death of a sinner but rather that all men should be saved. I know that God is just and merciful but I do not know how His justice and His mercy will both be fulfilled in all eternity. I do know that the answer is the Cross of Christ – that Jesus suffered an agonising death for the sins of the whole world.

Whether everyone is saved, therefore, or whether just a few are saved, the Christian religion does not teach that it doesn't matter what sort of people we are, that God doesn't care about justice and righteousness, that God is a sort of celestial Santa who would never really carry out his threat to leave empty the stockings of naughty children. Whether or not everyone is saved, I know that my salvation is through the Cross of Christ. Given that He so loved me, I don't really see that I can skip church when I've got "better" things to do, drop just my loose change in the collection plate, pray only when I feel like it, and ignore our Christian responsibility to preach the Gospel throughout the world, to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and visit the prisoner, and to act as lights in the world, the salt of the earth and the leaven which leavens the lump.

March 10<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 8 vv 16&17

Resting not by day or by night sounds like our 24/7 society. There really is nothing new under the sun. But all this restless striving doesn't answer the ultimate questions. These are answered only when we rest in God.

March 11<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 9 v1

Another puzzle is that we have free will and yet God's Kingdom certainly will come. Men and women are free to choose whether or not to cooperate with God. Our actions have consequences both for ourselves and for other people. Sometimes we do bad things. Sometimes we act stupidly. Sometimes we do good things but they appear to come to nothing through what appears to be bad luck. We are in the hands of God, Who is our Judge. Our actions are in the hands of God and so is the outcome of our actions. I find great hope in this, that despite our many inadequacies, *God is working His purpose out*. Of course we have to do our best but even though our best inevitably is far from good enough, God brings about what is right and good, working with us and through us.

March 12<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 9 vv 2&3

You may be a good person. You go to church every week. You thank God for everything that He has given you and share generously with other people. You obey the Law. You hesitate to make rash oaths. Yet you will die just the same as the person who does none of those things. So what conclusion do we draw? That there is therefore after all no justice in the universe or that there must be more to life than life?

March 13<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 9 vv 4-6

*A living dog is better than a dead lion.*

Dogs were rather despised in the Middle East and lions respected, but life is better than death. A poor beggar living is better off than a dead prime minister or film star. Death annihilates everything. Jesus came, however, that we might have life in all its fulness (John 10<sup>10</sup>). There is more to life than life.

March 14<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 9 vv 7-9

I found these verses rather disturbing. The idea seems to be that you might as well get on and enjoy life because it doesn't mean anything anyway. I know some people do seem to feel like that. We've said before. You eat every day to stay alive. You learn enough to work. You work to pay for your food and shelter. You have children who start the whole cycle again and then you die. Human life looked at merely in material terms is quite depressing. What gives life to life is to regard all these things in the light of eternity. Our lives are the outworking of God's purposes. Everything we have is the gift of His love. In His love He gives us all our talents and opportunities. Our relationships reflect His Love. Our eternal destiny is to abide in His Love.

March 15<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 9 v10

Having said that, we have to make the most of what God has given us in this life. They used to talk about people who were so heavenly minded that they were no earthly use. You aren't too spiritual to earn a living or to keep your garden tidy or to wash up. We perform all these tasks in the light of eternity. Eternity isn't an excuse for neglecting the mundane so long as we live in the world. In fact, performing mundane tasks in the light of eternity is often an aspect of our spiritual growth.

March 16<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 9 v11

*The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong.*

That is another of those quotations which seem familiar but we may not always recognise that they come from the Bible. Looked at negatively, this too is depressing. After four years hard training the Olympic athlete sprains his ankle the morning of the race. The powerful army besieging a rebellious city goes down with cholera. The brightest pupil in the class has measles on the day of the 11+. The hardworking craftsman loses all his stock in a flash flood while the layabout wins the lottery. Whatever you do, however well you prepare, in the end it's just luck. It isn't of course, but anyway, there is a positive way of looking at this. In the providence of God we may win the race, defeat the tyrant, build up a business or whatever despite our personal inadequacies. David may beat Goliath.

March 17<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 9 v12

Today is St Patrick's Day. As the Roman Empire withdrew from the British Isles, civilisation collapsed in on itself. The Celts were no longer able to main Romano-British civilisation. The Saxons invaded. The Dark Ages began. Life seemed very uncertain. Life was hard and often short. The Christian Church offered light in the darkness. She preserved learning. She cared for the poor and the sick. Above all she bore witness to the eternal Truth that life is much more than being born and struggling to survive until you die. Life is the gift of God. Life is knowing God and Jesus Christ Whom He has sent. Life lived in the Light of Christ is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness and temperance – the fruits of the Holy Spirit, even it is also fishing from a small boat in treacherous waters or keeping sheep on a freezing cold hillside, eating never enough, sleeping in a hovel and living in fear of invaders from over the seas. Life worth living. Would we think the life a poor person in the Dark Ages worth living? Is our life worth living? Only in the Light of Christ.

love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness and temperance – the fruits of the Holy Spirit.

March 18<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 9 vv 13-16

I once worked in a context in which there were conflicts between different interests. It seemed to me that a big part of the problem was the way the parish concerned was organised. It wasn't clear who was responsible for what, which decision making bodies had authority over particular questions and how those decision making bodies related to one another. I suggested that the constitution needed to be redrawn in a proper legal context. After months of nagging on my part it was agreed that this should indeed be done. The work was not completed however until after I had left and I was invited back to the service inaugurating the new way of doing things. You can imagine how my pride was hurt when all the credit was given to the people who had taken my idea and worked with it and none at all to me whose idea it was in the first place. I can't necessarily claim to be the unremarked wise man who saved the city because I don't know how my ideas worked out in the long run, but I know what Solomon meant!

March 19<sup>th</sup> (S Joseph)

Ecclesiastes 9 vv 17-18

Because he was a carpenter, Joseph is regarded as the patron saint of workers. To give workers a patron saint seems much more positive than to keep reminding us that all human labour is vanity as Ecclesiastes seems to do. There are two complementary views of work in the Bible. On the one hand there is Genesis 1. God creates everything that there is. He creates human beings in His own image. It is divine to create and we are fulfilling our roll as His children when we are creative. Then there is Genesis 3 in which humanity is punished for our rebellion against God by being forced to labour to earn our bread.

We might relate to this by contrasting the jobs that human beings have to do to earn a living or perhaps as hobbies. Some jobs are obviously fulfilling in themselves – artist, actor, architect, doctor, teacher, landscape gardener. Some people would do these jobs even if they weren't paid for them. But some jobs might seem like drudgery. They have to be done. The people who do them need the money, but they probably wouldn't do them if they didn't have to.

I think there is a better way of distinguishing however between divine work and resented drudgery and that is attitude. Anything can be fulfilling if we recognise that we are serving God and humanity, no matter how dull or unpleasant. Anything, no matter how glamorous, can be drudgery if we do it in a spirit of selfishness.

March 20<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 10 v1

I once had a tutor whom I very much respected. He was extremely thorough in analysing every aspect of a question before he published an academic paper. The result was that he hardly got round to publishing anything because there are always potential flaws. If we insist on doing things perfectly, we may well finish up doing nothing. On the other hand, if we are sloppy and are prepared to put up with second rate work, then second rate work is what we'll get. As Christians we aspire to Christ-like perfection, to being holy as God is holy. We don't accept a lower standard, but neither are we paralysed by our inability to attain it, because our sanctification is the work of a merciful God, Who understands all our weakness.

March 21<sup>st</sup>

Ecclesiastes 10 v2

Today is the commemoration of Thomas Cranmer. Archbishop of Canterbury under Henry VIII, Cranmer guided the English Reformation through dangerous times. Under Edward he was able to take things much further in the direction in which he wanted to go, but Queen Mary imprisoned him and forced him to sign a recantation of his protestant beliefs of face martyrdom as part of her campaign to bring England back under Rome. It is understandable that Cranmer signed, but then he was ashamed that he had and submitted to being burnt at the stake for his faithfulness to the English Church and to Christ. He thrust the hand which had signed the recantation into the flames. So the right hand of the wise man!

March 22<sup>nd</sup>

Ecclesiastes 10 v3

It wasn't a satnav. It was something very similar – a map printed by a computer to give directions. *Is this the right way to Ranscombe Farm?* the lorry driver asked. *Yes*, I replied, *if you can get that lorry over two stiles and up a public footpath*. We hear lots of stories like these. This lorry driver was wise enough to ask, but it seems that lots of foolish people just obey the voice of their satnav even when it tells them to drive off a cliff. What about the course we set for our journey through life? Wouldn't the wise man choose wisdom? Wouldn't he use reason? Wouldn't he be careful only to put his trust in a guide he knew he could rely on?

March 23<sup>rd</sup>

Ecclesiastes 10 v4

What do you do when the boss bawls you out but you know that you are right? You're not likely to get far if you pick a fight with him. On the other hand, it isn't good for him, for the company or for your self-respect if you cravenly capitulate. What about a courtier in the court of an eastern potentate? Argue with the man who has the power of life and death over you? Shamefully give in to what you know to be wrong? Cranmer argued with Mary Tudor's theologians. Then he capitulated. Then he accepted martyrdom. Ecclesiastes seems to suggest that quietly to stand firm is the best plan, but, from what has gone before, he obviously can't guarantee that the wise man will eventually be listened to. Still I think an unassuming obstinacy offers the best chance.

March 24<sup>th</sup> (Palm Sunday)

Ecclesiastes 10 vv 5-7

The preacher is bothered by the fact that things often don't seem to work out the way they are supposed to. Fools prosper. The wicked are honoured. Princes walk and servants ride.

On Palm Sunday, the Servant of God rode. Kings rode asses or mules when they came in peace (and horses when they rode into battle). The King of Peace rode into Jerusalem on an ass. The Servant of the LORD (the Suffering Servant) was hailed as the King, the Messiah, the Son of David. The Wisdom of God was honoured as a king. He became the sacrifice. He was the high priest and the temple of God. The kingdoms of this world were to become the Kingdom of our God and of His Christ not by the shedding of the blood of His enemies but by the shedding of His own Blood on the Cross. *But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence.* (I Corinthians 1<sup>27-29</sup>).

March 25<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 10 vv 8&9

*What goes around comes around* seems to be the thought here. If you make trouble, expect trouble. He who lives by the sword shall die by the sword.

In most years we would celebrate the Annunciation today, when the angel Gabriel told Mary that she would be the Mother of the Lord. This year the Annunciation is postponed till 8<sup>th</sup> April because it can't fall in Holy Week or Easter Week. Think about Mary, however. She was God's lowly handmaiden. She accepted God's Will for her life. Thus through her humble service, the mighty would be put down from their seat and the humble and meek would be exalted.

*What goes around comes around.* Walk with God and be a blessing or live selfishly and ruin your own life and the lives of those around you.

March 26<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 10 vv 10-15

In the Bible we are confronted by alternatives and you can have only two alternatives. You are wise or foolish, good or bad. You are for Christ or you are against Him. You belong to the Church or you belong to the world. You are an heir of the kingdom or you are not.

*Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me.* (Mark 8<sup>34</sup>). Elijah asked people in his own day, *How long halt ye between two opinions? If the LORD be God, follow him, but if Baal; then follow him.* (I Kings 18<sup>21</sup>).

This isn't to say that Christians are perfect on earth, but it is to say that we live as people who absolutely aspire to be like Christ. There is no room for half-heartedness in our Christian discipleship, no place for compromise with sin, the world or the devil. Christians aren't people who might be a little bit better than their neighbours; we are people who have given our lives to the Lord.

March 27<sup>th</sup>

Ecclesiastes 10 vv 16-20

These are all common sense observations. We need wise and mature rulers. If we're lazy, we're going to lose out. Extravagance brings ruin. You're going to get found out if you say in private what you wouldn't want said to someone's face. All obvious, but we still need reminding even after more than 2,000 years.

March 28<sup>th</sup> (Maundy Thursday)

Ecclesiastes 11 vv 1&2

*Cast thy bread upon the waters for thou shalt find it after many days.* Another familiar saying which we may forget comes from the Bible. It was one of my grandmother's favourites. She took it to mean that if you were generous to people in need you would never go short yourself. It was a principle she lived by and, though she never had much, God never let her down.

Today is Maundy Thursday. Jesus the Bread of Life gives Himself in the Sacrament of Bread and Wine. He washes His disciples' feet and tells them that He has set us an example. He gives us the new commandment, that we should love one another. God's generous love in Christ nourishing us so that we might become what nourishes us.



March 29<sup>th</sup> (Good Friday)

Ecclesiastes 11 vv 3-6

The illusion of hopelessness. Rain falls and the clouds are empty. A tree is blown over and dies. It can't get up again. All our plans come to nothing. Remember how Jesus appears on Easter Day to two disciples on the Road to Emmaus. They don't recognise them and He asks what they are discussing. They reply, *Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, which was a prophet mighty in word and deed before God and all the people: And how the chief priests and our rulers delivered him to be condemned to death, and have crucified him, But we trusted that it had been he which should have redeemed Israel.* (Luke 24<sup>19-21</sup>). Their hopes, their plans had come to nothing.

The disciples must have felt hopeless is the darkness of Good Friday. It had all been pointless, everything that Jesus had preached, taught and achieved. It had all come to nothing. Vanity of vanities!

Yet the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 55) says that the Word of God is like the rain from heaven. It waters the earth. It cleanses. It brings life. It causes growth. It nourishes the earth. The Word doesn't return to God void. He accomplishes what God sent Him to do.

The tree of life is the Cross of Jesus. He will not remain buried in the earth. He will return to life and bring His beloved with Him.

When Jesus' enemies crucify Him it might look as if they have won. Darkness, evil and death have triumphed. How little we know! We don't know how a child is formed in the womb and how it receives life. There is a great deal in the material universe that we don't understand. How much less do we understand spiritual things, heavenly things.

We might use ignorance, superstition or despair as excuses not to get on with our work or even our lives. But trust God. Get on with it. He's in charge.

Show thy servants thy work: and their children thy glory.  
And the glorious Majesty of the Lord our God be upon us:  
prosper thou the work of our hands upon us, O prosper thou  
our handy-work. (Psalm 90 <sup>16&17</sup>).

March 30<sup>th</sup> (Holy Saturday)

Ecclesiastes 11 vv 7-10

We all live our lives in the knowledge that we shall die. Some people long for death, even want help to commit suicide, because their present is so terrible or because they are so afraid of the future. Some few people like St Paul may be so much looking forward to heaven that they can hardly wait – though even Paul acknowledges that he'll have to stay here until his work on earth is over (Philippians 1<sup>21-26</sup>). Most of us, however, aren't in that much of a hurry to die. We like our lives on earth. We want to achieve something worthwhile. We maybe hope to see our children grow up. Perhaps we worry about how our families will manage without us. We're not sure about our legacy. What will future generations think of us? What will they do with what we have left them? We may not like the thought that they might undo what we have done.

Holy Saturday reminds us that Jesus shared the experience of death too. He died and was buried. We don't have to be afraid to go where He has gone. He opened the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers. He knows what it is to die and to be buried. He is our guide and our companion. He leads us and accompanies us through the grave into the fulness of eternal life. So we do not have to be afraid for ourselves or for our loved ones. Jesus is our companion in death as in life.

When He died, rose and ascended He left His work to the Church in the power of the Holy Spirit. When we die we die in faith not only for our inheritance in Heaven but trusting God for what we leave behind, the people we hope to see again one day when their time comes and the things we believe we have achieved. If our achievements are right for future generations, they are still there for them. If they are not right for the future, as faithful Christians we shall be pleased if the future tears them down and rebuilds. What matters for us is that we are found faithful in our generation.

Our death, our leaving this earth, our entering into our Lord's glory are all shared by Him and there is no need to be afraid.

March 31<sup>st</sup> (Easter Sunday)

Ecclesiastes 12 vv 1-18

So we come to end of this unique book on the greatest festival of the Christian year. Ecclesiastes struggles with us poor feeble human beings to make sense of life. Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life. We can only live in the Light of God and Jesus is the Light of the world. Life on earth presents us with many possibilities. We have enormous potential as human beings. We are created in the image of God. Yet we are prone to forget God, to sin, and the wages of sin is death. Yet the Death of Jesus is a ransom for many. He is the propitiation for the sins of the whole world. We are dust, yet God has breathed into us the breath of life. Through the second Adam the Holy Spirit has come, the quickening Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life. Death is swallowed up in victory. The only way to live is by the Wisdom of God and Jesus is the power of God and the wisdom of God. *Fear God and keep his commandments*. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom. Jesus was obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus. A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another.

Solomon, great David's son, in his wisdom raises all these questions and tentatively answers some of them. Jesus, great David's greater Son, the Lord's Anointed, is the One in Whom all these questions are raised and the answer to them all. Jesus is the meaning of life.

For all the promises of God in him *are* yea and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us. (II Corinthians 1<sup>20</sup>).

