

“Enjoy God’s Gifts Today”

16 January 2022 - Led by Rev. Sam Mawhinney

Welcome & Call to Worship

Hymn of Preparation: Come People of the Risen King

Prayers of Adoration & Confession

Reading: Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:26

Sermon:

Introduction - stories of work and wealth and what will make us happy

- Story of our extra bank holiday at St Patrick’s day
- Sheep farmer who would sell his flock if he won the lottery
- A gentleman who has health issues is taking early retirement because his work is so stressful

The Teacher continues his quest for meaning and he searches in many of the usual places, including work and wealth.

It is important that we understand the things he tries are not bad, he is not anti-life, indeed he explores life in all its different aspects with great enthusiasm.

His method is to try something, evaluate it, like an experiment and make a conclusion, until he finds the meaning of life! This section is autobiographical and is either Solomon’s reflections or one who takes on the persona of “Solomon” depending on your view of when the book was written and who wrote the book.

So let us get started.

I. Understanding: (v12-18): *“I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven.”*

David Gibson pictures him enrolling at Jerusalem university as the genius student. I once read that Watson and Crick the medical students who discovered the structure of DNA, needed to learn a new area of science (biochemistry) to further their studies and so they took the course in a matter of months, so that they could understand how things worked at the molecular level, smart people!

The Teacher is on a similar mission he wants to understand, and he is a smart man, he studies hard, he is what we might call a genius, able to explore science, literature, social sciences, medicine and psychology with unlimited resources. Can the meaning of life be found in understanding and education? That is his quest!

His conclusion, *“What a heavy burden God has placed on humanity!”* What does he mean by that? We should note this is the first time he has mentioned God. He uses the term Elohim, which is not a personal name (Yahweh) but the more general, conceptual and universal term for God. His conclusion (v14) is bleak, meaningless, hebel, vapour, and he uses a new idea of *“chasing after the wind”*. An impossible and frustrating task. The word chasing means, “herding” in Hebrew.

My family had a small farm which was on steep ground and my father would send my brother and myself to herd the cattle, we testify that there is nothing so frustrating as herding cattle to a gate and then they escape and run back up to the top of the field, herding cattle can be frustrating and hard work, herding the wind impossible. The Teacher gives us his conclusion in a proverb, (v15) *"What is twisted cannot be fixed, what is lacking cannot be counted."* Education, wisdom and knowledge do not make things better, the flaws in a person's character may be curtailed but not eradicated, the randomness of life is not helped by understanding its randomness, these things including death cannot be fixed by education.

II. Comedy (v17) *"Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom and also of madness and folly."*

He tried to see if laughter, joking, not taking life seriously was the answer but this also led to frustration, a herding of the wind. There has recently been a huge increase in the genre of comedy, while it may be distracting at the time after the laugh or the joke the reality stubbornly persists. David Gibson in his book on Ecclesiastes says, *"Have you ever read the auto biography of a comedian? They are so often among the loneliest and saddest people in the world."*

His conclusion is expressed in another proverb or wise saying, (v18) is increased education, wisdom and knowledge and comedy, brings sorrow and grief.

His conclusion is the opposite of what we tend to believe. Parents believe that education is their child's greatest need and are often prepared to pay for it. Society believes its problems will be solved by better education and understanding, but we are better educated than ever, yet the murder rate is still high, the sexual abuse and assault rates are still high, our addiction rates are raising, our mental health rates are still rising, our planet is warming and suffering, and we still over consume. Understanding and education as the Teacher says through his proverbs, cannot make right what is wrong, or count what you don't have and knowing this brings sorrow and grief.

Like you I was shocked by the murder of the young schoolteacher in Tullamore. I tried in light of Ecclesiastes to understand it! To try and understand why a man in his inner being and heart was prepared to kill, or lusted to such an extent at the female body, or exercised power and violence, was so driven by something evil within him that he committed such an appalling act. Understanding the reality of the human heart fills my heart with grief and causes me to sorrow.

However, I cannot understand, and my mind ultimately says it is hebel, meaningless, a herding after wind, when I try to understand why Tullamore, why Ashling, why a 23-year-old, why the grief for her parents and siblings and friends, why the shock and fear for that community, why the nightmare for those first class pupils and their teachers, when I try to understand it, its oppressive it brings me grief. The teacher has not found the answer in understanding and education, in fact knowing more and considering life and the human heart only brings him sorrow and grief.

III. Pleasure (2:1-11) *"Come now I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good."*

For many who have read Ecclesiastes this is the section they remember, he experiments with different options available in life. Laughter, wine, great projects or design and creativity, wealth and sex. His purpose was to find out what was good. As I said at the beginning at no

point does he say these things are bad or evil, they are all in fact gifts (v24-26) from God and it is important we hear that clearly.

He is always in control, his mind is active, he is not drunk,(v3) he is not suspending his mind, or driven only by feelings he is as v9 says doing it all with wisdom and his conclusion comes in v10-11. It could not be clearer, he piles up the words we have come to know, hebel, herding after wind, no profit under the sun. He is gutted really because all this toil, the effort, the sweat and the sleepless nights indulging in good and pleasurable things didn't do it for him.

You may be aware that the Lottery had to be won this weekend and I read that the shops were frantic with people looking for a share of the €19 million. (One person won!) I have always been struck by the adverts the Lottery company use. It was originally buying a desert island and having boxes of Tayto crisps delivered and more recently it is having your own water slide in your apartment complex, and I wonder, is that the best you can do, is that the reward for having unbelievable wealth. How long do you think that would be the answer to the meaning of life, 3 days, 3 months more like the first and then you would be wanting to experience some thing else and even if you could well there is always death to put an end to search. It is not hard for the thinking person to become very downhearted at the futility of life when they truly think about what it is that they are working for and investing their life in.

"I denied myself nothing my eyes desired,.....nothing was gained under the sun." (v10-11) As David Gibson says, *"the bubble of pleasure is burst."*

But did you note that there is a glimmer of light, something positive in v10b, *"My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for my labour."* There was good in the work, there was good in the completed tasks and in the moment. It was good to laugh, it was good to be cheered by wine, it was good to be creative and undertake projects, it was good to have wealth, it was good to sing and be entertained or to be entertaining and sex is good. Remember that little shaft of light as we move to the next section.

IV. Wisdom and folly (v12-23) *"Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom; and also madness and folly."*

His argument is as the smartest person who has ever lived the one who follows him, his successor cannot improve on what he has done and thought through. If the king cannot not find the meaning of life, there cannot be one! However, he admits it is better to be wise than foolish because the wise at least see better, whereas the fool walks in darkness. Yet even this he concedes is meaningless, Hebel because both die and will be forgotten, the spectre of death haunts him. (v14ff)

It appears that this really hits him hard,

V17 I hated life; it is futile and has no meaning

V18-19, 21 I hated all my toil; in the end everything is given to another and there is no guarantee of how they will use it

V20 So I despaired over my life in the moment. Let us not underestimate the despair in society at large, the things of life do not ultimately give us meaning and in a pandemic even these things are denied us, it is a serious situation and the mental health of all of us has suffered.

V22 he ask a question. *“What does a person achieve for all their toil and anxious striving under the sun?”* or in more modern terms, what value being a workaholic, and having a restless ambition to achieve? You might expect his answer to be nothing! Yet his answer in v23 is even bleaker.

V23 *“all their days their work is pain and grief; even at night their mind does not rest, this too is meaningless”* What is worse than achieving nothing? When achieving nothing causes pain, grief, worry and sleepless nights.

The meaning of life was not found in understanding or education, nor in pleasure in its many forms, nor in wisdom or folly because of the reality of death and he is utterly despondent. It is Hebel, meaningless, a chasing or herding of the wind, a futile exercise and worse its causes much sorrow and grief as many will agree.

My initial reaction would be to give up and do nothing, but as many students come to realise about their third year if you don't work you don't eat or live! So, what should we do what does the Teacher say, what is his conclusion, what is his glimmer of hope?

V. Enjoy God's gifts today: (v24-26) *“A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their work.”*

These verses pick up the glimmer of hope expressed in 2:10. His advice is to enjoy or find satisfaction in eating, drinking and work, which is his way of saying, all the activities of life. Enjoy life. He explains that these are gifts from God (v24 and v26) so they are to be enjoyed as gifts NOT to as things to be toiled for. Such attitude and behaviour please God. So, this is the beginning of hope, that glimmer of light, we are to enjoy the gifts that God gives now, today. Enjoy the moment.

I think this is what bucket lists are when a person knows they are dying and death is inevitable, they enjoy the experiences for themselves not to an end for their own gain. David Gibson asks this searching question about work in this context, *“What if our work was not designed to make us successful but simply to be faithful and generous?”*

This is contrasted with the sinner. This person, the sinner, is the one who walks in darkness, who simply doesn't see, and therefore misses the mark or point of life, to love God and enjoy his gifts. They toil and strive to store up for the future for themselves and without thought of God and without appreciation of his gift of life and the gifts of life.

This reminds us of the Garden of Eden and the sin of humanity in rejecting the word and Lordship of God. In essence humanities striving has been to re-create Eden and when this is done without reference to God then there is some reward in the work, but death wipes out all gain and this meaningless. Jesus came to this world and gave dignity to work as a carpenter and as a preacher. He inaugurated and set up a new Kingdom, where he is Lord, and we serve him and each other. Matthew Ch 6:33 *“But Seek first his Kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well.”*

These things, all these things are gifts from God in life, they are their own reward from God, we pursue them and live within them not to gain for ourselves but to bring glory to God and hope to others.

Praise: Knowing You (All I Once Held Dear)

Announcements

Prayers for Others

Closing Hymn: Come Thou Fount

Discussion Questions:

What makes people happy? What do their lives reveal about what they *think* will make them happy?

What gets you up in the morning?

David Gibson writes, "*What if our work was never intended to make us successful, but simply to make us faithful and generous?*" Discuss what you think of Gibson's question. How might it impact the way you approach your tasks this week?

What joys do Jesus and the gospel bring to your everyday life?