

## **“Living In A Broken World”**

30 January 2022 - Led by Rev. Sam Mawhinney

### **Welcome & Call to Worship**

**Hymn of Preparation:** Holy, Holy, Holy

### **Prayers of Adoration & Confession**

**Reading:** Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:16

### **Sermon:**

The heading I have given this is living in a broken world. The Teacher (Qoheleth) is very observant, he watches life in the world he inhabits, limited by the time frame, “under the sun”. So 3:16 *“and I saw something else under the sun.”* There is much that is wrong, he sees injustice in the law courts and reflects on that in 3:16-22 drawing a familiar conclusion about work. He is dismayed by oppression of the weak and vulnerable and it appears to drive him to despair even of life itself in 4:1-3. He sees in all work the driving force of envy and he outlines with simplicity and genius three hand positions of response, in 4:5-6 and then he looks again and explores the very relevant idea of rugged individualism contrasted with the idea that two are better than one in 4:9 and in a story which most people do not fully understand in v13-16 about a king and a youth. So, it is our privilege to explore the observations and reflections of the Teacher on life in a broken world by this wise man and his goal is to urge us to not join in the meaninglessness of it all but to pursue a different path.

It is important that we grasp, not just the theme of the Teachers reflections but the goal. He is calling us to respond, to react rightly to the broken world and he will set out four responses which he has seen, two are wrong and two right and take us in the right direction.

The context is time, God sets the times, and he has reminded us of Gods calling the past to account (3:15) so the Teacher is not just helping us understand the times he is calling us to account, as God will do. As we face a new and very significant time in our lives, at this time of relaxation of the rules of pandemic what will we do with these freedoms? How will we respond to this new opportunity to assess our lives and life of our church? It my prayer that the godly advice available in this section we will think through and apply to our hearts.

### **I. Injustice in the place of justice (3:16-22)**

One of the shocking realities in our world is the corruption and particularly the corruption of the judiciary. It is seen in every country. The IT Weekend Review published a map of the CPI that is the Corruption Perceptions Index yesterday. The global average was just 43 out of a possible 100 points and hasn't changed in 10 years. Delayed trials, inexplicable decisions, sentences out of step with the crime, bribery. The world is corrupt. Injustice is all around and the Teacher observes it and reflects upon it. He offers us two reflections.

First the standard Christian response of v17. *“God will bring to judgement both the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time for every deed.”* It is a promise that God will judge; that there is a time for justice, a time that God will choose. We must understand that truth, all will be judged by God, for every deed done. God as judge,

possesses all the facts, is fair and impartial and at a time of his choosing he will bring judgement to every activity. There is a time for justice.

This for those who suffer injustice this is tremendously reassuring. This weekend marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Bloody Sunday, and we must hold to the truth that God will bring justice. Those believers in India who are suffering for their faith will receive justice. If you have been wronged by any institution or individual, you will receive justice. It is the Christian standard response, and it is true.

However, the truth of that statement does not give us what we want! What we want is justice now, and often though we are reassured that God will judge, it appears it is not now. This creates huge difficulties for us, issues of legacy and how to deal with them, of anger and bitterness at the injustice, loss of faith in God. I realise there is a lot more to be said about this, but the Teacher's first reflection states God will judge all people and all situations in his time and that is the hope we have in the face of injustice.

Secondly, he reflects, "I also thought" (v18) on humanity being like the animals. In what sense am I like our dogs, Toby and Winnie? In what sense does God test us, to prove the premise that we are like dogs? The best thought refers to the seeming delay in justice and how the delay tests humanity; will humans simply throw off moral restraint, take revenge, and curse God. The Teacher confirms this later in 8:11 "*when the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, the hearts of the people are filled with schemes to do wrong.*" I watched a film No 10 on Netflix in Ireland called Amandla, a powerful but dark portrayal of injustice and the brutality of revenge in apartheid South Africa, that ends up with numerous deaths and extreme futility and sadness.

We might casually say that those who perpetrate injustice are like animals, but the Teacher takes that to a new level. Humans and animals share the same fate, both die, and they share the same destiny, dust.

It was reported that one of the people who died in the recent Tongan tsunami did so because they went back for their dogs. Instinctively we question the wisdom of that decision because we believe that humans are special. This appears to have been an argument the Teacher also heard, and he is not denying that truth, but his focus is at the level of under the sun, and he is right to say no-one knows if the spirit of the human and the spirit of the animal go up or down. Under the sun, there is no advantage of humanity over animals and that is hebel, a vapour, inconsequential, meaningless because of the reality of death.

Therefore, for now, considering the injustice in the world, the Teacher says as he has said before (2:24; 3:12) enjoy, your work, now. We may as well enjoy and make the best of our short life on earth, we can leave the justice to God, who will call everyone to account.

## **II. The distress of oppression (4:1-3)**

The teacher looks again at life under the sun and is struck by the oppression of the strong against the weak, he sees their tears and their lack of anyone to advocate. There is a difference of opinion about why he repeats the phrase, "*and they have no comforter*". David Gibson says the bible is the only place where you will find concern for the oppressor and Sidney Greidanus says it most definitely isn't a concern for the oppressor, the first time is an expression of consolation, but the repetition means that they are moved to be an advocate. I am honestly not sure what is the right interpretation but slightly favour the later because of the absolute darkness and sadness of his words that follow, the dead are happier than the

living for they do not have to look at oppression and the unborn are happier still for they have not seen the oppression. We might initially think he is being extremely gloomy and depressive. But Derek Kidner is surely right, *"If Qoholeth's gloom strikes us as excessive at this point, we may need to ask if our more cheerful lookout springs from hope and not complacency. While we as Christians see further ahead than he allowed himself to look, it is no reason to spare ourselves the realities of the present."*

The teacher allows himself to feel the reality of oppression!

### **III. The driving force of envy (4:4)**

This is a strong and comprehensive statement, he observes, *"I saw that all labour and all achievement spring from one person's envy of his neighbour."* I heard a very successful doctor once tell me and a few other medical students that when he needed inspiration, he just had to look out the window of his office. So, we all turned and looked out the window and we saw the Belfast City Hospital. We were in the RVH where he was a consultant! Always competing, always comparing, always looking at the success of others, and ministers are not exempt, jealousy is a real issue of the human heart.

The Teacher acknowledges it and he is dismayed that our striving for more and to be better than the other person is in the end meaningless, hebel, of no consequence.

### **IV. The loneliness of individualism (4:7-16)**

Lastly, he sees the successful person who has no friends, or family and has amassed a great deal of success in wealth and status, but having reached the peak they ask themselves some telling questions, who was I working for, and, why did I deny myself so much pleasure on the journey? As David Gibson says this is the successful corporate CEO, it is the self-made man or woman, it is the one who puts celebrity, wealth, or position ahead of everything else in life and who when they have what they wanted, begin to realise they are neither satisfied or contented. This is meaningless. Perhaps captured by the telling remark, no-one says on their death bed I wish I had spent more time in the office.

Jesus didn't hold back in declaring that such people were "fools" for they had made no provision for death and judgement from God. He warned the disciples in the Sermon on The Mount, *"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven where moth and rust do not destroy and where thieves do not break in and steal."* Matt 6:19-20

As the teacher reflects on the reality of this story of solitary striving, he highlights the benefits of companionship and community in the classic statement of v9, *"Two are better than one"*. They have a better return, help each other, keep each other warm, and protect each other. These were originally speaking of dangerous journeys in the Middle East but are easily transferred to the importance of everyday life. Marriage can be in view, flying an aeroplane, business, cycling, two are better than one.

We like to apply the final comment to marriage as well and see the third strand within a rope as being a metaphor for the person of God, I have done so myself. However, it is likely he is simply saying two are great, three is better, and so would four or five!

In v13-16 he adds a story about an old king who now doesn't take advice he is an example of a loner, and he is replaced by a youth who rises from prison and poverty to take over from the King and he has many followers. (v16) the Hebrew is difficult but the idea of those who

were before him probably means those whom he led but note that within a generation they have forgotten him. (A good illustration of this story is Joseph and his rise to leadership in Egypt which we looked at in our Advent series) The point, *“even a life guided by wisdom, even a life that reaches the pinnacle of human achievement, even a life that is exalted by the adoration of millions, is futile in the end.”* Sidney Griedanus Both the King who refused advice and was increasing side-lined in life or the brilliant young man who rose to such prominence but died and was forgotten, they have achieved nothing and this is meaningless, hebel, a fruitless chasing after the wind.

## **V. How might we respond? (v5, 6, 9, 12)**

The big question underlining his observation and his reflection is to advise and even warn us about how we should work in the face of injustice, oppression, envy and rugged individualism. Work in that culture at that time was about the use of your hands and his response is given to us by the position of our hands.

### **A. Folded hands: opt out (v5)**

In the light of such evil and serious stress and difficulty it is easy to say to yourself, I'm doing nothing. Laziness, withdrawing into mindless entertainment, holiday escape, giving up and not facing the reality. The text says such a person eats their own flesh, they take of others, and they will take from themselves, no work, no food. The teacher says opting out, doing nothing is not a good option.

### **B. Cupped hands: Workaholic(v6)**

This person has the opposite mentality, take as much as you can, strive to get more, bigger is better. Expand, diverse, reach out and as such they become the proverbial workaholic.

### **C. Open hand: work with tranquillity (v6)**

Here we are content with what we have. Content with what is enough for the day. Give us this day our daily bread. We are not worrying about the future, striving for more. We have an open hand, and do not desire more and are happy to let it slip away if that is necessary. David Gibson captures the essence of this well, with his title of chapter 4, *“Living a life less upwardly mobile.”*

### **D. Hold hands: work in community (v9,12)**

Here we work with others, we value relationships and community. Jesus had his three close disciples, the twelve, the 70. He sent his disciples out two by two, he valued family blood and church. The early church devoted themselves to the apostles teaching to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayer.

Can I ask us to take these four hand positions to heart and think what will I do now that the restrictions of the pandemic are over!

Better one handful with tranquillity, two are better than one, better the one who listens to advise or takes a warning because God will judge every activity when he decides. The Teacher encourages us to live in a broken world, with our hand open and the other holding onto someone.

**Praise:** The Church's One Foundation

**Announcements**

**Prayers for Others**

**Closing Hymn:** Great Is The Darkness

**Discussion Questions:**

How much time did you spend working last week? How much time did you spend relaxing with others? How did this impact your life this week as a whole?

“Better one handful with tranquillity, than two handfuls of toil” (Ecclesiastes 4:6). What might ‘one handful with tranquillity’ look like for you?

As we enter a new season with minimal restrictions, what are some practical ways you might seek to ‘hold hands’ (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12) in the coming weeks?

“There is a time for everything” and God promises there will be a time for judgment. What difference might this truth make?