

“No Profit in Life Apart from God”

9 January 2022 - Led by Rev. Sam Mawhinney

Welcome & Call to Worship

Hymn of Preparation: Lord of the Years

Prayers of Adoration & Confession

Reading: Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

Sermon:

I hear that Ireland’s tax take was enormous and it appears that we are doing very well economically even in the pandemic, with tax receipts up in all sectors and that is a good thing because it means our deficit is not as bad as we thought. Life in Ireland is economically good. Added to this our employment rates are high. The government believes that the spring and summer will see an improvement in our circumstances regarding Covid with increased freedoms. Life is looking good for us.

The author of Ecclesiastes would challenge that superficial thinking. He has compiled for us the words of a teacher and a leader in Israel who begins his message with the emphatic statement in v2, that everything in life is meaningless, what are we to make of that? And he repeats the same statement at the end of his collection of wisdom in 12:8, clearly declaring that after his informed look at life in all its forms he must draw the conclusion of that “everything in life is meaningless”.

Our task and privilege this term will be to explore the teachers’ words and his examination of life, his quest for meaning and his conclusion and see if what he says is true, makes sense and can direct us to the place of wisdom that does give meaning to life. It is my prayer that we will engage and enjoy our series on the book of Ecclesiastes, “The quest for meaning”.

I. Some key terms and ideas

It is important that we do a little work on some of the key words and ideas as we look at his take on life. The Teacher, in v1 with a capital T is a translation of the Hebrew Qoheleth. The Teacher has until recently always been thought to be Solomon, son of David, King of Jerusalem. I believe the words are Solomon’s, but I have read and know that others believe that the book was written later, the arguments are interesting but there appears no definitive reason to change the view that Solomon’s experience and words are used here. Though I like using the word Qoheleth we will simply call him The Teacher. Notice too, that Qoheleth doesn’t write the book, his words are used by a narrator as instruction or warning to Israel and so to us.

The principle way The Teacher describes life is by the Hebrew word Hebel. He uses it 38 times. It’s a word we need to think about if we are to understand his point. The best picture of Hebel’s meaning is vapour or mist and the primary ideas it conveys are transience something being short lived, and because his focus is on human life and its activities, the

most significant issue for the teacher is the reality of death, the theme and reality of death permeates the book.

Secondly the idea in Hebel is of vapour being weightless, of no consequence, hard to grasp. Like the steam from a kettle, or early morning mist, it is seen but it doesn't last and is hard to weigh or grasp. This is a consistent view in scripture, David the Psalmist says, "*You have made my days a mere handbreath; the span of my years is as nothing before you. Each person's life is but a breath.*" Psalm 39:5 Jesus' brother James in his letter in the NT says, "*What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.*" 4:14 Our life is short lived and lacks weight and significance.

Like a stereophonic sound the Teacher reiterates Hebel, Hebel transience and lack of substance. He is blasting it in our ears because he wants to warn us, to impart wisdom to us and to help us to see the truth of what he says so that we will be realistic about life and look to God. He is going to view life from different angles, and as Derek Kidner says the teacher has, "*a fascinating and independent mind*".

He begins with a question about the profit we gain from our toil, labour or work (v3) This is his starter question, "*What does someone gain from all their labour at which they toil under the sun?*"

The word gain, "yitron" in Hebrew is an economic word, it refers to what is left over after all the expenses have been paid, the profit, so his question is what does your labour profit you.

Lastly, we must understand the idea he conveys with the phrase "*under the sun*" "*Tahat Hassemes*". It is used 27 times in the book and is important. The idea of under the sun refers to what happens on earth, within a day, what is time limited, life on the horizontal. When he uses that phrase he observes life within the constraints of time, on earth. The reality of everyone, Christian and non-Christian, is that time is our ultimate limitation. Sky sports have a countdown clock on their screen to indicate the transfer window, we have a clock like that running in our lives. We cannot go back and revisit our childhood or teenage years or get back the fitness we had in the past if we are 59 years, and the clock is ticking, and we are running out of time, under the sun.

In these first 11 verses God is not mentioned, and if God is missing then time is all you have; so the Teacher warns, and shocks us into reality.

Summary: The teachers words declare that everything in life is transient and without any substance, and our labour (work) profits us nothing when time is all we have and God is not included. Therefore, his premise is, "*There is no profit in life apart from God*" You live and work, you die and all you profit is left to another. Having set up the premise he then seeks to defend it as any good and wise teacher would do.

II. Hebel in life and nature (v.4-8a)

I am 60 this year and have enjoyed good health, but I am becoming very aware of retirement and even death. I have been the minister in ARPC for 13 years and many of you will not even know the name of the previous minister. Generations come and Generations go, (v4) is the phrase we use commonly but the teacher actually reversed the order, he said, generations

go and generations come, highlighting the change and the replacement that occurs. There is no gain because we die, and the earth remains the same when we pass on. Life is short.

The sun is described as in a circuit which is fascinating because it confirms what we now definitively know about the earth's orbit around the sun and is described as hurrying back. East to West and panting back to position. It could be viewed positively like a dog running for the stick or negatively like the athlete doing circuit training and panting with exhaustion. Its relentless, never pauses, and ultimately there is no gain from its work. Life is a treadmill we can embrace it with enthusiasm like the dog with the stick or see it as a training session, wither way it is relentless and circular. Life can be exhausting.

The wind likewise in a North South direction, round and round ever returning, it is free and restless and yet without gain. We often describe our lives as busy, hectic; he describes life as without direction, or conscious thought. Life can be frantic like the wind, where have we come from, been going to, and what did it achieve.

The streams and the sea. It appears he is thinking of the Dead Sea which is 420 m below sea level and the streams flow into it, but it doesn't gain. Or the Mediterranean Sea that is never full. As he observes there is no gain from the constant flow of the water.

His verdict (v8) is life is wearisome, *"all things are wearisome, more than one can say"*.

III. Hebel in human activity: (v8b) words that are spoken are endless, sights to see are endless, sounds to hear are endless, our senses and appetites can never be satisfied there are always more.

IV. Hebel in human History: (v9-11). Children are born, inventions are created, wars are started, governments are formed, death comes. Nothing is new and we not remembered. I enjoyed the RTE Treaty Live programme and was struck about how it was very much as today even though it happened 100 years ago and just down the road here in Earlsfort Terrace.

Life, nature, human activity and history wherever The Teacher probes he sees that in life lived in time, under the sun, and without reference to God, people gain nothing from their toil. It is Hebel, transient and without weight utterly meaningless.

V. The wisdom and warning of Jesus.

Our culture values knowledge and expertise. Our news channels look for the expert voice, the specialist voice, from a person who is an expert on Australian sports law dealing with the visa issues of Novak Djokovic, or the Chief medical officer speaking about Covid and what we should do. Wisdom though is not only about knowledge in the sense of facts but knowledge that is about relationship and understanding and worked out in community. Wisdom in scripture is often portrayed as a person, and particularly within the Proverbs. Wisdom is portrayed as both Father and mother, a male and female voice and the plea or warning is to listen, to accept, to store up the wisdom offered. This personification of wisdom, that is wisdom in a person is perfectly seen in Jesus, he is the wisest person ever to have lived and

he endorses exactly what the teacher says in these verses, and he does it by statement of fact and by story.

Jesus said, "What good will it be for those who gain the whole world and yet forfeit their soul? Matthew 16:26

And he told a story in the context of being asked to adjudicate in an inheritance dispute:

"The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. ¹⁷ He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' ¹⁸ "Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. ¹⁹ And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry."'" ²⁰ "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' ²¹ "This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God." Luke Ch 12:16-21

The teacher says life is a vapour, short and insubstantial and if you work without any reference to God, your accumulation of assets will immediately disappear when you die, and your name or reputation will begin to fade, your effort will be pointless, your end will be as your beginning, and that he says is *hebel*, meaningless!

Let me appeal to everyone, consider the Teachers words, consider your life, make sure that your life is invested in God and for God.

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm, let nothing move you. Always give yourselves to the work of the Lord because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain. 1st Corinthians 15:58

Praise: Seek Ye First

Announcements

Prayers for Others

Closing Hymn: Across the Lands

Discussion Questions:

What do you think gives meaning to life?

What does it mean for life, or aspects of it, to be described as 'meaningless'?

The Hebrew word *hebel*, translated as 'meaningless' or 'vanity', literally means 'vapour' or 'breath'. How does this imagery impact your thinking about this passage?

What question(s) does this passage challenge you to ask about your life?