

## ARPC Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> February 2022 OOS

### Welcome & Call to Worship

Let me start by reminding some of you or perhaps introducing others for the first time to a person called Job whose story is told in the OT. He was a great and successful man. (1-3) One of the angels (Satan) has an audience with God and God calls Job righteous (v8) Job was a man who loved his family, but Job receives news of their death (18-20) they all die in a series of catastrophes in fact his wealth and health are also taken from him. Job is deeply traumatised, but his response was to worship God. (21) The book is a troubling one on the nature of suffering and the big question why bad things happen to good people and what our response should not be, (Jobs friends) and what it should be. In our service today we will look at the big questions of life with the Teacher (Qoheleth) and the book of Job is a fitting backdrop to our thinking.

We have not suffered as Job did and we do have so many reasons to praise God, created gifts and the gift of salvation. So let us begin by singing of our many reasons to worship God.

**Praise:** 10,000 reasons

Prayers of Adoration & Confession (Ezequiel)

**Reading:** Ecclesiastes 6:10-7:29 (Ciaran)

The big questions are in 6:12 and 7:15 and they are surrounded with the Teachers wisdom which is at times surprising and requires plenty of thought. One of the Teachers more famous statements is in 12:12 *"Of the making of many books there is no end and much study wearies the body"* Study, thinking, remembering wrestling is hard work. It starts with reading and listening.

### **ARPC Ecclesiastes Ch 6:10-7:29 Wisdom's search of life's big questions? 13<sup>th</sup> February 2022**

The Teacher (Qoheleth) explores the life he sees and experiences under the sun, sincerely trying with wisdom to find out what sense he can make of his *"few and meaningless days"* (6:12; 7:15) which sounds so sad and pessimistic but is really a straight up fact that his life is brief (he may be relatively young) and because of death apparently meaningless, Hebel! We see the same things and live the same life.

The Teacher's questions are important and universal, what is the meaning of life? what lies beyond death? (6:12) and regarding suffering, why does a good and righteous person die young, and a wicked person live into old age? (7:15) His answers are surprising, and the text is difficult at times but there is much to be learned.

If you have had a shocking thing happen to you, or have witnessed a shocking thing, the question why is relevant, why this, why me, why them, why now? Recently we watched the frantic efforts of the authorities in Morocco try to rescue Rayan a 5-year boy who had fallen down a well. Like many we prayed but Rayan died, and we felt sad, the Hebel in life, its adversity and brevity, not making sense, contrary to what we believe to be right. Why did young Rayan fall down a well and die despite the best efforts of the authorities and the

prayers of many around the world? Added to this is frustration of not knowing, of not having an answer to help his parents, which the Teacher acknowledges repeatedly.

7:14 *“humanity cannot discover anything about their future”*

7:24 *“whatever wisdom may be, it is far off and most profound-who can discover it?”*

7:29 *“This only have I found”*

8:17 *No-one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all his efforts to search it out, man cannot discover its meaning. Even if the wise man claims he knows, he cannot really comprehend it.”*

However, that does not mean that he cannot learn anything and so he with wisdom searches for answers and in doing so he uncovers some interesting truths.

### **The questions (6:12)**

- Who knows what is good for us in life and what will happen after our death?

### **The wisdom (6:10-7:12)**

#### **Context: the certainty with God (6:10-12)**

He starts with creation and speaks of certainty, *“whatever exists has already been named and what man is has been made known”* The earth is the earth, the sky is the sky, the moon is the moon, light is light, and dark is dark because God created and named it. So too for humanity, God has created us, a living soul in a created body made in the image of God, male and female. The fact is indisputable, God is the stronger one, he has made it so, it is the way it is. Adam and Eve disputed with God, they believed the lie of Satan, *“did God say”*, but they were made very aware of his strength in judgement. Our society is absolutely committed to challenging God on most of these issues, but it usually involves long, complicated and futile arguments about what is very clear. (v11) *“the more words the less meaning and how does that profit anyone?”* There are realities which are certain, God has made them and named them. It is from that context of certainty he asks his question about what is not known. God gives us a base to answer from!

#### **Some things are better (7:1-12)**

He turns to wisdom, and he uses proverbs with the theme of better than in a world of contrasts, he begins to process everything by the idea of something being better than something else. In Hebrew the literal is *“more good than”*, the good/better idea is used 11 times in these verses. Some things are better!

#### **Death is better (1-6)**

Surprisingly the teacher says death is better than your birth, (v1) *“the day of death better than the day of birth”*. It is better to acknowledge the fact that death will come to you, (v2b) We say that cannot be right, but his argument is, everyone must face death (v2) therefore learn from it. All these verses say this in slightly different ways. Take for example v5, if death is a teacher, then death is wisdom’s rebuke, better to listen to that voice than the song of

fools. What does your death mean? It means the wages of your sin, and the gospel is the answer, but the gift of God is eternal life.

Death is better than laughter, laughter is not synonymous with joy but with silliness, frivolity, triviality and failing to face facts, this is like the cracking and short-lived noise experienced when burning thorns. (v6) As we have noted before our culture excels in triviality.

The Psalmist David says, *“teach us to number our days aright that we may gain a heart of wisdom.”* Psalm 90:12

David Gibson entitles his book, *“Destiny: Learning to live by preparing to die”*.

Jesus taught the same thing in his Sermon on the Mount, *blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, blessed are those who are persecuted, blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you.....*

I watched the funeral of a lady called Betty Jackson who was the wife of a PCI Irish Mission worker here in Dublin. Betty and Ken could not have children, but God lead them to Ireland and an orphanage in Drewstown house. It was a moving service of a lady who lived her life well for her Lord and saviour and who had become a mum to many men. As her coffin was carried out, the exit was to sound of the rousing hymn “mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord”. For the one who has sorted out with God the fact of their death in the gospel, the day of death is better than the day of birth. This fact was wonderfully true for Betty. What about us? Have we learned to live by preparing to die in Jesus Christ?

### **Wisdom is better (v7-12)**

He turns his attention to the wise. Even the wise are pressurised to act foolishly and extort or accept a bribe in the adversities of life. However, patience and being slow to anger is better, it is better to see the matter through, because the end of a matter is better than its beginning. Nor should we look back at the past and bemoan the reality of now compared to the good old days. Wisdom is a refuge, a good thing like an inheritance, it is like having money. The inheritance in Israel was land, (Numbers 26:53) it was a gift given and protected you even if you had to sell your land in hard times. Why? Firstly, you were entitled to the crops from the land regardless of ownership and you received your land back on the day of Jubilee. It was your permanent possession and the security you needed in adversity. (v12) *“Wisdom preserves the life of its possessor”*.

(Quote the Rev Stephen Lowry PCI herald February 2022) Wisdom is of benefit even in the extremes of adversity, like inheritance and money, if we possess wisdom, we are persevered, saved!

How counter-cultural this is! The Teacher’s point is exactly what Rev Lowry says are the lessons he learned, it is true, death and adversity are teachers that the living should take to heart. (7:2)

### **The conclusion (v13-14)**

Here then is the conclusion of the matter. We cannot change what God has made, *who can straighten what God has made crooked*, God has brought both the good and the bad, the blessing and the adversity, and so wisdom accepts what he gives. And as to the future we still do not know what it holds but we know that whatever God gives cannot be changed and he can be trusted.

So even though the question remains unanswered we have a basis to live by, the certainly that God knows, the wisdom of things being better than, including the most extreme adversity of death and looking to learn from whatever experience we find ourselves in. Here is hope even though he could not know what the future held.

However imagine what it would be like to have this wisdom and also know the future which is the position we are in in Christ.

Romans Ch 8:31-39

### **The question (7:15)**

Why do the good die young and the wicked live long lives?

The Teacher speaks about meaninglessness of his life (v15) and yet in the time he has lived he has seen two things. He has seen the righteous (good) person die. We have seen that as well. He acknowledges that some might wonder about their righteousness, so he emphasizes, their death in their righteousness. These are good people who die. This is Abel murdered by his brother, this is Naboth murdered by Ahab, this is Stephen murdered by Jewish religious. He has also seen the hardened criminal live long even as he continued in his criminality. This is intrinsically wrong, our sense of justice is offended, our understanding of the promises of God, concern us, Deuteronomy 5:33 *“Walk in all the ways the Lord your God has commanded you, so that you may live and prosper and prolong your days in the land that you will possess.”* This is the paradox with which the Teacher wrestles, what happens is contrary to human inclination and divine promise. Such events challenge faith.

### **The wisdom (v16-18)**

Is not what we expect! He says, do not be super-righteous, or otherwise, that will destroy you. Do not be over wicked (that is very wicked) or a fool, why die before your time? He tells us it is good to acknowledge and hold to both aspects of the wisdom given, that is don't be super-righteous or very wicked, and the one who fears God *“will avoid all extremes”* or *“will succeed at both”* *“or will follow both”*!

I acknowledge this is difficult, as do the commentators. What is he really saying? Is he saying live life in the middle, with mediocrity, neither being too righteous or very wicked but perhaps a little bit wicked? It doesn't seem likely as Jesus said he hated us being luke-warm, and he would spew us out of his mouth. (Rev Ch 4 the church at Laodicea)

His wisdom in the face of life's paradoxes, and those things that are difficult to understand is we should avoid trying to please God with a pharisaic super-righteousness, with a human pride that says if I'm really good and religious then I will avoid any disaster in life. Such a response means we do not see God properly, he is to us a vindictive bully whom we must

somehow please, nor do we understand the reality of life that the righteous do sometimes perish despite their righteousness, and most tragically it is a salvation by work and we do not properly fear God and seek his grace.

He is also saying neither should we give up on God when life makes no sense and abandon all restraint and turn to wicked living. Super-righteousness destroys our lives and super-wickedness leads to an early death. In this we also see God as capricious, vindictive and we rail against him, or we see him as being powerless, unloving and uncaring and so we abandon restraint, belief and sin with abandon.

To truly fear God, respect and trust the God of the bible will cause us to avoid these extremes and by faith recognise we must trust him and walk with him through the doubt and questions. Fear God.

### **Wisdom's corrective (v19-22)**

The teacher has told us not to be over wise and to not be a fool and of course we might be tempted because of such advice to reject wisdom and in folly forget its power and truth. These verses are a corrective. Wisdom has more power than 10 city rulers says' the Teacher. Wisdom tells us that all have sinned and to prove his point he asks us to listen to others talk about us and consider what you say about others. You will quickly realise that sin is in all our hearts. All sin, there is a flaw in everyone, that is the message of the gospel, these very words being used by the apostle Paul, *"for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"* Romans 3:23. This relates back to our previous point that righteousness is out of the grasp of humanity and so we are tempted to try harder and become super-righteous or we may give up and prove the nature we have in wickedness, but wisdom acknowledges the fact that no-one is righteous and looks to Jesus as our perfect righteousness. *"It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us the wisdom of God-that is our righteousness, holiness and redemption."* 1<sup>st</sup> Cor 1:30

### **Wisdom's search. (v23-25)**

The teachers search for the answer to the paradox he has witnessed is sincere and he is of course a person of ability and means. His investigation is wide ranging including wisdom and the scheme of things, the stupidity of wickedness, and the madness of folly (v25) The idea of the scheme of things, literally means the sum of things. We say 1+1=2 and we also say 1+1 does not always equal 2 when life doesn't make sense. The Teacher is a serious, scholar, philosopher and theologian and his determination is sincere. *"All this I tested by wisdom"*

### **Wisdom's answer (v26-29)**

There are four things the Teacher found.

### **Hope despite strong temptation (*adversity and paradox*) (v26)**

This is classic wisdom from Proverbs. It is the advice given by a father to his son to avoid the prostitute because her charms are a trap, she is a hunter, and he will be the hapless victim. It is important to remember this is a picture, a femme fatale, and not an individual woman, nor is it only females, who might lead us into sin. However, the picture is evocative; the

undoubted attractiveness of the female form, the intensity of sexual desire, and the availability are a powerful picture of the temptation. For the teacher to fall to temptation is bitter, more bitter than death, because it can be avoided.

Our hope is that temptation can be overcome, we do not need to be victims, we can please God and as the Teacher has already said of those who please him, *“God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness”* 2:26 and as Jesus said, *“My sheep listen to my voice; I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no-one can snatch them out of my hand.”* John 10:27-28 As the apostle Paul says *“No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. When you are tempted, he will provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”* 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians Ch 10:13

Our hope is Jesus and his word in the face of the temptation of adversity and paradox.

### **No answer could be found: The sum did not work out (v27-28a)**

I can do Sudoku's and I try and do some each week. It is so frustrating to get near the end of one and realise that it will not work, you have two 6's on the one box or line. It's a mistake, it doesn't add up. For this wise man the answer was not forthcoming. The question, why do bad things happen to good people? Answer I do not know. We must be very careful in the paradoxes of life, we need to be quiet and suffer with the people, support, comfort and not give unhelpful answers. If you want a good story to accompany this wisdom the story of Job provides excellent commentary.

### **His search did not reveal many righteous people (v28)**

In my bible the word upright is in small brackets because it is not in the text, but all agree it is inferred because of the contrast with upright in v29 as we were created by God. The Teacher has been unable to find the sum of things, to understand the scheme, and likewise he has been unable to find upright or righteous people, in other words he has found the universal reality of foolishness. Sidney Greidanus believes his comment shows a degree of chauvinism, others think he is quoting an existing proverb, but the overall message is that in his search he did not find any great degree of righteousness in humanity. We all sin, there was only one righteous man and it is to him that we need to look.

### **God is not to blame (v29)**

Following on from this he acknowledges that God created humanity perfectly. He is recalling the Genesis account, when God had finished creating, *“God saw that it was good”* He created both male and female and he made them very good. So, what has gone wrong, well they have gone in search of many schemes, they have pursued life without God and ended up in a mess. They have schemed to break the boundaries God set, as Adam and Eve did. They have conspired to live in community without God as they did in setting up cities and cultures hostile to God's ways and they conspired to be God and reach to the skies in towers and so the mess is not of God's making, it is the responsibility of humanity. Yet though all of this is true it does not answer the question of why bad things happen to good people. At best it tells why bad things are in the world but not why they happen to the righteous.

Therefore, his original advice holds, in the face off the paradoxes of life, when it simply doesn't make sense, don't try to be super-righteous, and earn his favour, don't give up on God and descend into wickedness and reject his favour. Instead fear God and trust in his righteousness alone, follow his voice because, *"my sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they shall never perish; no-one can snatch them out of my hand."* John 10:27-28 He is the good shepherd who walks with us in the shadow of the valley of death.

**Praise:** The Lord is my shepherd (Stuart Townend)

When life is tough, when there are questions, it is good to know you have someone who cares and is wise. The shepherd is a fantastic picture of one who has your back, is with you and is able. Jesus said he was the good shepherd.

### **Announcements**

### **Prayers of Intercession**

**Praise:** IPH Be thou my vision This great Irish hymn, has wonderful echoes of the wisdom of the Teacher in Ecclesiastes and is a prayer for God to be the most important person and reality in our lives.

### **Benediction**

### **Questions:**

Death has many faces - suffering, adversity, injustice, oppression, loss, physical death. In this passage, the Teacher presents Death as a teacher.

- What does he mean, that death is a teacher? What lessons have you learned from your encounters with Death?
- The Teacher claims that the day of death is better than the day of birth (Eccl. 7:1). What do you think he means by this statement? How is this more richly true for those who are in Christ (e.g. Philippians 1:21-23)?

Reread Ecclesiastes 7:15-18. When the outcomes of life seem inconsistent, are you more tempted towards an 'overrighteous' or 'overwicked' response? What does this temptation look like? How might you seek to 'fear God' and resist both extremes in the week ahead?