



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Seventh Sunday After Trinity

readings: [Ecclesiastes 1.2, 12-14; 2.18-23](#), [Colossians 3.1-11](#), [Luke 12.13 - 21](#)

31 July 2022

The Old Testament reading from the Book of Ecclesiastes presents quite a challenge. It only appears in our cycle of readings once every three years and even then is an alternative and it can be so easily avoided.

The Book comes with the authority of the one who is styled – ‘the Teacher who is king over Israel in Jerusalem’. Unfortunately, the translation we read doesn’t quite give us the right feel of the original Hebrew language which worked with images from the natural world rather than philosophy. Instead of the word ‘vanity’, it’s better to say breath. ‘Merest breath said the Teacher, merest breath. All is merest breath’, Breath or vapour captures the Teacher’s view of the transient, ephemeral nature of human life, his view of the absurdity of existence much better.

Read Ecclesiastes through and we find nothing but questions about human living. This book that is so little read in the church’s worship captures the importance of asking questions as part of the spiritual life. It expresses the importance of doubt, the importance of posing the big questions. I suspect that it remained amongst the books of the scriptures as they were being compiled because it represented a healthy challenge to some of the certainties of faith, found in some books of the Bible.

But there is a problem - because the Teacher goes too far. Take the last sentence of the passage we read. He asks himself: ‘what is it that human beings get out of the hard work of working under the sun?’

The days of a human being are all about strife and pain from labour that goes unrewarded. We cannot escape the circularity of human life. Men and women go to bed at night with their minds full of questions, asking what is life all about beyond the pain? The furthest the teacher of Ecclesiastes can go is to say is that ‘its merest breath, and in a memorable phrase – it’s like a chasing after wind – or better like ‘the herding of wind’, which goes round and round! In other words, there’s no point in even asking the question let alone continuing the daily toil!

The Teacher falls short. He is too content to push the big questions to one side and leave them unanswered. Yes, he confronts the reality of human life; yes, he is prepared to ask the critical questions – but there it stops. He has been called a ‘laid-back agnostic’ⁱ and the accusation of pessimism for which the Teacher is well known is justified. He has a belief in God – that is not in doubt from a reading of the whole book – but he’s not interested enough in the way that faith might offer insight into the big questions. He is open to the charge that he gives up the struggle too quickly, unprepared to go below the surface of the reality and toughness of human life.

He is, I believe, a counter-example to a lively, searching faith that is not afraid of the big questions. This is not a book we should glance at once every three years – more a book to have in the back of our minds every day!

The word Ecclesiastes itself means the one who gathers a community, and this resonates with our life together as a Cathedral church. In our small group meetings to discuss the new Cathedral Strategy and Vision, we have talked about the importance of Derby Cathedral growing as a learning community. We wish to become a gathering place for people to talk about the Christian faith; we wish to become a 'go to' place where key questions about society, economics, politics and culture are asked and debated from the perspective of faith. Those of you who have been to one of our workshops will have heard how Chapter imagines the future of our Cathedral church: a lively engagement through the lens of the Christian faith with the big questions about the world, and about our setting within it.

If we do follow the example of the Book of Ecclesiastes and the questions the teacher asks, in contrast to him we set our stall out to go further in the struggle of questioning, with a commitment to an animated discussion that joins in asking those challenging questions that so many have today within the local communities with which we are involved.

And we approach the story of the rich farmer in St Luke's Gospel through the lens of Ecclesiastes. The rich landowner is a good example of a 'laid-back agnostic'. He does not see the urgency of asking the right questions. In fact, in the aftermath of a remarkably good harvest which makes him even richer, he can barely ask any questions at all.

I hope you picked up the loneliness, the self-isolation from others with whom he might have been in conversation about how to respond to an outstanding harvest. He has no concern other than his own security. No one else is considered only himself. There is no question about sharing, no question about the poor, no question about how the community might benefit from a bumper harvest, knowing that the following year might be one of famine. No wider concern for the common good.

The rich farmer cannot see beyond his false vision of the provision of his own good life for many years to come. Like the teacher of Ecclesiastes, he is taken up and trapped in his own world, unwilling to face the right questions, unwilling and - through the impact of his greed – unable to escape the trap into which he has fallen. The result is an insatiable greed that undermines the Israelite law to take care of the poor and vulnerable. It is a desire distorted by the turning in towards the fulfilment of the self and not of the other.

Both the teacher of Ecclesiastes and the rich farmer have spiralled down into a self-focused world of their own making, unable to engage with the big questions with a lively, animated faith that seeks answers.

And this is why we are presented with the vision of St Paul from his letter to the Colossian church. Paul is asking the biggest question of all: what is to be the impact on our lives of the death and resurrection of Christ, that cosmic event that stands at the centre of human history? How does it make things different? How does the human heart change? What's the consequence of setting our enquiring minds on the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God?

It is the power of the spirit of Christ released at the resurrection that can transform the human heart and turn its focus onto the other. This means that we can put down and let go all that draws

us towards our own selves. A dominating selfish desire for our own security belongs to the past and not to God's future. No longer is our disposition towards others to be framed by division, untruthfulness and defensiveness but the death and resurrection of Christ has opened up a new framing, an alternative possibility for our relationships with each other, so that there is no longer Greek and Jew, resident and alien, but a way of relating where everyone is in Christ.

This is the antidote to the teacher of Ecclesiastes, the escape route from deep self-serving selfishness by the rich farmer. This is what it means to be rich towards God. This is what the transforming power of Christ offers each one of us. The resurrection of Christ offers the power to re-shape our desires, to reorient them towards God and his purposes. And it's through grace that we ask the big questions and don't evade them, because this is part of our growth as followers of Jesus.

Yesterday in the Church of England's calendar we commemorated Olaudah Equiano. His story is from the mid-18th century, and it's astonishing. He was born in South Nigeria in the Benin area around 1745. When he was 11, he was captured and sold into slavery. He was transported across the Atlantic to the Americas where he was bought by a British Naval officer and then by a Quaker businessman. He managed to buy his freedom for £40 in 1766 and became a seaman – travelling to the West Indies, the Mediterranean and then Canada. He came to England and joined in the eighteenth-century campaign to end slave trading and slavery. He wrote his autobiography with the title 'The interesting narrative of the life of Oloudah Equiano', which sold nine editions, let alone those published after his death in 1797. He was baptised at St Margaret's Westminster and the Christian faith was at the centre of his remarkable life.

Olaudah Equiano was not afraid to ask the big questions and challenge how life was. He describes his conversion:

In my deep consternation the Lord was pleased to break in upon my soul with his bright beams of heavenly light; and in an instant as it were, removing the veil, and letting light into a dark place. I saw clearly the crucified Saviour bleeding on the cross : the scriptures became an unsealed book.

I was sensible of the invisible hand of God. The Lord pursued me although I slighted and disregarded it: his mercy melted me down. Tortures, murder and every other imaginable barbarity and iniquity, are practised upon the poor slaves with impunity. I hope the slave trade will be abolished. I pray that in a short time one sentiment alone will prevail, from motives of interest as well as justice and humanity.ⁱⁱ

Slavery was not an inevitability for Olaudah Equiano. He had the courage to bring the matter to the surface of eighteenth-century Britain. Through his deep questioning of his experience of brutality and oppression he became an agent of change for his time. He was a leading advocate of the anti-slavery movement with William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson that led to the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and of slavery itself in 1833.

No detached philosopher like the teacher of Ecclesiastes but someone with the capacity to pursue the question. The vision of the cross of Christ and of the power of God's love to change the human heart gave Olaudah Equiano a new vision for human beings based on justice and shared humanity. May we have the courage like Olaudah Equiano to ask the key questions, to persevere in the task of learning with others, and to work with God on the answers.

ⁱ The term if from David Brown, *The Word To Set You Free*, p.79ff

ⁱⁱ Quoted in *Celebrating the Saints*, p.287