

2022-10-23 ... 6.30pm Evensong Sermon ... Mrs Jane Rylands

Ecclesiastes 11, 12; 2 Timothy 2: 1-8

‘Vanity of Vanities says the Teacher, All is Vanity’

Or Meaningless, Meaningless, Everything is meaningless.

It’s an interesting approach for a book of Wisdom!

The three main wisdom books of the Old Testament show up one of the first things you learn as a newby theologian which is that the Bible is not just one book, it is a whole library of very different books.

The three main wisdom books are Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes. Proverbs sees life’s problems solved with a kind of common-sense. **Job** tackles God about his unjust predicament with full on passion which I desperately admire (although I obviously hope never to be in anywhere near so awful a situation). Ecclesiastes, the Teacher in our translation, has a completely opposite demeanour, one which I’m sure we all share at least some of the time – Is there any point in bothering?

No matter what we try, what advances we make, things don’t change. We still have children dying, children illiterate; people suffering from cancer, from poverty, from hunger; minority groups pilloried; corruption in the corridors of power, wars ... the list seems to get longer rather than shorter. We still have good people dying young and bad people getting rich. We ruin the world, our behaviour threatens to bring destruction upon humankind, maybe even to wipe it out. What is the point of bothering?

The Teacher, modelled on King Solomon although most likely written several centuries later, has had it all – riches, wine, women and song. As an old man he realises that it has got him no further than anyone else. It is everyone’s fate to die and to take nothing out of the world.

I wonder whether your advice on living would be the same as the Teacher’s? I think it’s reasonably accurate to summarise it as ‘get on with life, enjoy the good bits, deal with the bad bits. Do what you can to stay on the right side of God but don’t expect to make sense of what God is playing at, it all seems so meaningless.

The Jews have the full twelve chapters of Ecclesiastes as a set reading at Sukkot, the Festival of Tents or Tabernacles, a harvest festival, celebrated this year just the week before last. Perhaps it is chosen as a warning against depending on success and prosperity.

I have **Philip Yancey**¹, who is better read than me, to thank for pointing out that existential nihilistic writing tends to sprout ‘from the soil of excess’. He quotes Viktor Frankl a concentration camp survivor saying that victims in the camps did not dare to succumb to meaninglessness for only an enduring faith in meaning kept them alive. And **novelist Philip Roth** writing after a trip into Eastern Europe during the Cold War that: ***‘In the West everything goes and nothing matters. While in the East, nothing goes and everything matters’***.

We can see all around us people who have not even noticed, as Ecclesiastes has at least, that **‘God has set eternity in the hearts of men’**. We benefit from the extended holy story of Jesus and the message of love and the power of loving that he brought. When we find ourselves muttering, ‘What is the point’ I hope that we will remember the promises of our future home with God, and the time when all will be revealed.

As Paul commands Timothy, this is the good news we should share.

¹ Philip Yancey, The Bible Jesus Read