

+ The book of Ecclesiastes, from which I will shortly read our Old Testament lesson, is as problematic and befuddling as its author. The book is so named *Ecclesiastes*, a Greek word meaning something like “leader of the assembly” or “the preacher,” because that is how the author names himself. Clues in the text, as well as long-standing Jewish and Christian tradition, have identified this “preacher” as King Solomon, the son of David and Bathsheba, third king of Israel, builder of the temple at Jerusalem, and ruler over God's chosen people during what could rightly be described as the “Golden Age” of Israel. Widely reputed for his wisdom, a student of both practical politics and natural philosophy, Solomon's court was the stuff of legend, a glittering jewel of education, material wealth, and right governance. In the Hebrew imagination, it came to function somewhat like Arthurian Camelot in later English literature. Never had things been so good, and never would they be the like again. “Judah and Israel dwelt safely,” the historian of the Book of Kings records, “every man under his vine and under his fig tree, from Dan even to Beersheba, all the days of Solomon.” After the building of the temple, the same historian relates that the people “blessed the king, and went unto their tents joyful and glad for all the goodness that the Lord had done for David his servant, and for Israel his people.” Solomon, referred to here by the name of his father, that man after God's own heart, is a kind of messiah figure, now firmly established on his throne after years of civil unrest, both between David's house and Saul's, and later between David and his own children. The king in his house, God in His holy temple, every man under his vine and fig tree; in a fairy tale, we would write then “and they all lived happily ever after.” But there was more than one snake in this Paradise, and this was not, at the last, the Son of David whom Israel was awaiting.

“But King Solomon loved many strange women,” the Book of Kings records, “together with the daughter of Pharaoh, women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians, and Hittites; of the nations concerning which the Lord said unto the children of Israel, Ye shall not go in to them, neither shall they come into you, for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods: Solomon clave unto these in love. And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines: and his wives turned away his heart. For it came to pass, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned away his heart after other gods: and his heart was not perfect with the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father.”

We do not know at what point exactly King Solomon composed the Book of Ecclesiastes. However, the book has all the markings of a certain kind of weariness, of confusion, and perhaps even of repentance, that could place it shortly before, during, or even after this later stage in Solomon's spiritual journey. It gives us a sobering picture of a self-aware man, at the top of his game, so to speak, who, looking about him at nothing but good fortune and abundance, is sensible of a gnawing emptiness, a lack that nothing visible seems able to supply.

I said in my heart, Go to now, I will prove thee with mirth, therefore enjoy pleasure: and behold, this also is vanity. I said of laughter, It is mad: and of mirth, What doeth it? I sought in my heart to give myself unto wine, yet acquainting my heart with wisdom; and to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was that good for the sons of men, which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life. I made me great works, I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards: I made me gardens and orchards, and I planted trees in them of all kinds of fruits. I made me pools of water, to water therewith the wood that bringeth forth trees: I got me servants and maidens, and had servants born in my house; also I had great possessions of great and small cattle above all that were in Jerusalem before me: I gathered me also silver and gold and the peculiar treasure of kings and of the provinces: I gat me men singers and women singers, and the delights of the sons of men, as musical instruments, and that of all sorts. So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem: also my wisdom remained with me. And whatsoever my eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not from my heart any joy; for my heart rejoiced in all my labour: and this was my portion of all my labour. Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun.

Yea, I hated all my labour which I had taken under the sun: because I should leave it unto the man that shall be after me. And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool? Yet shall he have rule over all

SERMON – FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY – 1 JULY 2018

St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

Father Peter Joslyn

my labour wherein I have laboured, and wherein I have shown myself wise under the sun. This also is vanity. Therefore I went about to cause my heart to despair of all the labour which I took under the sun. For there is a man whose labour is in wisdom, and in knowledge, and in justice; yet to a man that hath not laboured therein shall he leave it for his portion. This also is vanity and a great evil. For what hath man of all his labour, and of the vexation of his heart, wherein he hath laboured under the sun? For all his days are sorrows, and his travail grief; yea, his heart taketh not rest in the night. This is also vanity.

This lament of Solomon's, especially his awareness of the fragility and evanescence of all that he had labored to build, makes perfect sense when you consider the character of his son, Rehoboam, whom the old king knew would follow him on the throne, and for whom, perhaps, the book of Proverbs had been written. This Rehoboam is in the running for biggest imbecile in the Bible, and would, within a few short years of Solomon's death, by a stunning display of cruelty and insensitivity, basically destroy the dynasty of his father and grandfather, and introduce a political division in Israel from which it would never recover. Yet even more poignant, though, is the absolute failure of “the good life,” in purely material terms, to satisfy this most fortunate of kings. Imagine yourself in the sort of life of which one might say, “whatsoever my eyes desire, I will not keep it not from them.” Everything—sensual pleasure, power, dignity, high culture—everything within your grasp. Vanity of vanities? How can that possibly be the case? And yet, Solomon tells us that the fruit is spoiled, and the aftertaste is bitter.

I'm reminded of a poem by Gilbert Keith Chesterton, called “The Aristocrat.” Criticizing the emptiness of pleasure and power-seeking among the elite of his own generation, Chesterton penned this short poem in which the Devil himself appears as an English noble, with a fine house near the village of “What'sitsname,” and to which he summons his devotees. As a young man and student of art, before he embraced the Christian faith, G.K. Chesterton had some kind of experience, darkly hinted at in some of his writings, of a certain diabolical abandonment that he sensed close to the heart of lives given over to the pursuit of worldly pleasure, and “The Aristocrat” closes with a somber warning:

O blind your eyes and break your heart and hack your hand away,
And lose your love, and shave your head, but do not go to stay,
At the little place in What'sitsname where folks are rich and clever;
The golden and the goodly house, where things grow worse forever;
There are things you need not know of, though you live and die in vain,
There are souls more sick of pleasure than you are sick of pain;
There is a game of April Fool that's played behind its door,
Where the fool remains forever, and the April comes no more.

“Lose your love,” Chesterton admonishes, but I think very much in hyperbole. For love is exactly what Solomon, and all those who have followed him in their estimation and enjoyment of material pleasure, have actually abandoned. Love is, in a very real sense, prior to both pleasure and to pain. It transcends and transforms them, and gives them meaning and substance. Without love, pleasure turns to ashes in the mouth, and pain is unbearable in its blank and terrible meaninglessness. We recognize this truth even in our ordinary and (frequently foolhardy) romantic affections. Clive Staples Lewis observed of *Eros*, i.e., the human love of man and woman, that “it is the very mark of Eros that when he is in use we had rather share unhappiness with the Beloved than be happy on any other terms. To Eros all calculations are irrelevant. Even when it become clear beyond all evasion that marriage with the Beloved cannot possibly lead to happiness—when it cannot even profess to offer any other life than that of tending an incurable invalid, of hopeless poverty, of exile, or of

SERMON – FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY – 1 JULY 2018

St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

Father Peter Joslyn

disgrace—Eros never hesitates to say, 'Better this than parting. Better to be miserable with her than happy without her. Let our hearts break provided they break together.' If the voice within us does not say this, it is not the voice of Eros.”

In truth, there must be a Love that animates not only the romantic side of life, which is, for all its temporary loudness and demand, but a small part of our whole human existence. There must be a Love which accomplishes the same thing for Life itself in its complete dimensions. There must be a Love which can say to all suffering—“it is good; not my will but thy will be done,” and to all pleasure: “it is good, but only because it is with, because it is by, because it is in You. It is for this Love that the whole created order cries out, because of its terrible absence therein.

And it is this Love which Solomon, the jaded and over-satiated Son of David, has abandoned in his heart, and which comes, as Son of David in truth and in the flesh, to the exhausted Galilaen fisherman, who complains: “Master, we have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing.” Teacher—Rabbi--Preacher--We have plumbed the depths, and have seized on emptiness, on vanity. It isn't fish that Peter is really after. Note that his reaction, and the reaction of the sons of Zebedee, is not to set up shop with an improved business model, viz., the Miraculous Rabbi Fish-Finder System. The nearly sunken boats are abandoned on the shore, the fish left to rot under the sun. The revelation of that Love which transcends and transforms all life is not even particularly pleasurable. St. Peter experiences it first with a proper religious horror—get away from me, O Lord, for I am a sinful man. He may have had some dark intimation that this Love, once accepted, would impel him with a certain irresistible power. “When thou wast young,” Christ says later to this fisher of men, “thou girdest thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldst: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldst not.”

It is only in the strength of this Love that life is, in the last analysis, not merely bearable, but even victorious. Without it, all is vanity under the sun. With it, pleasure and pain alike are absorbed in the happiness which is God, sanctified in the heart of man. “He that will love life, and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips that they speak no guile. Let him eschew evil, and do good; let him seek peace, and ensue it. And who is he that will harm you, if ye be followers—if you are lovers—of that which is good? But and if ye suffer for righteousness' sake, happy are ye: and be not afraid of their terror, neither be troubled: but sanctify the Lord God in your hearts.”

Let us, then, commit ourselves, forsaking all which is vanity, turning away from other gods, as did the apostles, to the Love of God, that is, to Christ Himself, and sanctify Him in our hearts, to whom be all glory and power and dominion, + Amen.