

## Rich towards God

St Leonard's Denmark, Alison Kershaw

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*Ecclesiastes 1.2, 12-14, 18-23. Psalm 49.1-12, Colossians 3.1-11, Luke 12.13-21*

I was tempted to give you all a fright by thumping the lectern and bellowing “Vanity of vanities, All is vanity” before launching into a tirade about the misery of the human condition – but I didn’t think you’d be entirely convinced by my performance. Besides which that would have quite missed the mood of *Ecclesiastes*, which is more weary and melancholy than full of fire and brimstone. “Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher; all is vanity.” These words mark the beginning and the end of this curious often beautiful book by a writer who assumes the persona of King Solomon. *Ecclesiastes* (meaning teacher) – it is the dramatic monologue of a wealthy man who has accumulated much, built houses, planted vineyards, orchards, gardens and parks, bought slaves and surrounded himself with singers and concubines, yet concludes, looking back, that it has all added up to nothing. While we usually think of vanity in the sense of being overly proud of ourselves and particularly of our good looks, or of having an inflated idea of our own talents and worth, the emphasis is more on the toils as well as the pleasures of life being *in vain* – futile and pointless. But the two meanings are related for if we could only see the pointlessness of existence, says the rather depressed author, we could hardly have a high opinion of ourselves.

The Hebrew word for vanity, *hevel*, might be translated as meaningless, absurd, emptiness, and useless. The literal meaning of *hevel* is breath or breeze which finds its way into the repeated metaphor for life’s endeavours as a “chasing after wind.” (Eccl.1.14, 17)<sup>i</sup> Interestingly, *The Message* translation I mentioned last week translates the meaning as “Smoke, nothing but smoke. [That’s what the Quaker says.] There’s nothing to anything—it’s all smoke.”

There isn’t time to talk about the whole book, but as we can see from the portion we’ve read this morning, the author has largely given his “heart up to despair” for as he observes elsewhere, there is “nothing new under the sun” (1.9) – and for all that has been done and forgotten and done all over again by future generations, “there is nothing to be gained under the sun.” Even the gaining of wisdom and knowledge is “chasing after wind.” He battles, however to not be totally cynical, urging satisfaction and joy in a virtuous and simple life, but even this is overshadowed by the recognition that justice is not always seen to be done, and “the same fate comes to everyone” no matter how righteous or wicked. (9.3) “Time and chance” (9.11) he says, play their games with us all, and who hasn’t had their secretly bitter moments of feeling like old “seen it all” King Solomon?

Now there are some comforts and consolations in *Ecclesiastes*, but in the portion we have today, we are living with the big question it raises. Likewise, the opening of Psalm 49 reflects on mortality and the injustices of life in the beautiful phrase “I will incline my ear to a riddle and unfold the mystery to the sounds of the harp.” (Ps 49. 3-4) Last week I also mentioned the short film where the rock star Bono and Eugene Peterson, author of *The Message* translation of the Bible discuss the Psalms. Bono points out that the Psalms are full of joy and triumph and hope, but they are also incredibly honest about all aspects of experience - they are also singing “the blues.”<sup>iii</sup> Melancholy has, over the centuries, produced some of the most beautiful and profound poetry – Like *Ecclesiastes*, the Psalm confronts death as the great leveller of rich and poor, wise and foolish.

So, having stated the riddle, and wearily asked ourselves all kinds of existential questions, we might then ask ourselves what is and what is not vanity – what does and doesn’t have meaning in life, and what is and what is not fleeting. What wisdom can Paul (or the writer of the *Letter to the Colossians*), and Jesus offer us in the face of life’s riddles? Both readings repeat and reinforce the teaching that there is no lasting reward in greed, which Paul describes as idolatry – which is not only about the worship of money, but more generally about selfishness – about a life lived entirely without regard to the welfare of others. The part I want to focus on, is the stripping away of the old, self-obsessed self with all its anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language - all behaviours that are hurtful to others and the antithesis of compassion and generosity. The “new self” however, is “renewed in knowledge according the image of its creator.” (Col. 3.11)

Gone is the despair of being unable to find anything new under the sun, for through a compassionate and generous life we grow into the image of the God of Love, and our very selves become new. In this renewal, there is no longer Greek and Jew, slave and free (and in a similar passage in Galatians 3:26-28 – also no longer male or female.) Not only is the false hierarchy of privilege swept away – but the habit of keeping ourselves separate from others is also done away with. Hoarding not only of money but of anything that we might share of ourselves, and withholding anything that we are capable of doing to enrich the lives of others - is life-denying – is death to the soul. But to aspire to reflect the image of the divine whose bounty overflows in creation and our better selves, is to live, and to find fresh hope in every day under the sun.

This is also the message of Jesus. It might seem reasonable for the person in the crowd to expect a fair share of his family inheritance. But Jesus, as he so often does, confounds our expectations. Friend, he says not unkindly, what makes you think I'm at all interested in your dispute over money? Then follows the story of the self-satisfied farmer which is as much to say - Why are you so concerned when in the end, all material possessions will count for absolutely nothing - as the saying goes 'you can't take it with you.' It is also implicit that the rich man had more than he actually needed - he had so much he had to tear down his barns which had sufficed up till now, and build larger ones. An alternative might have been to fill and keep the old barns, and not waste the resources that went into making them, and to build new barns for those in the district that had not enjoyed such abundance. You don't need me to point out the implications for today's world.

In the parable, just as the man sits back to enjoy all the fruits of his labour, God comes to him and says, don't be so pleased with yourself because tonight you will die, and what will all your hoarding have accomplished? "So, it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God." (Luke 12. 21) *Rich towards God*. That is a phrase worth sitting with. What might life look like for those who are rich towards God? How might I be rich towards God? Financial giving is an obvious answer from our readings this morning, but as well as this, they ask us to look deeper. A friend of mine is about to spend three months in an abbey, dedicating her time to meaningful work and prayer. We can be rich towards God in the attention we pay towards God, in re-shaping ourselves to the image of the loving creator. We can also be rich towards God by our actions, in the sharing of our time and ourselves. The emptiness experienced by weary old "seen it all" King Solomon, is dispelled by opening the barns of our hearts - our heart-space to others.

Returning to the Letter to the Colossians, the promise is that our new generous selves will be filled with the treasure of Christ who "is all and in all". There is a great incarnational mystery to that phrase as well - *Christ is all and in all* - Christ is the sum of all that is, and the source of all that is. Christ dwells in all things in all creation, and in all people. As our prayer of the day from Steven Shakespeare expresses it - Christ is "our common wealth."<sup>iii</sup> The mystery of the incarnate Christ is a rich inheritance that can't possibly be stored away - it can only be shared, excluding nothing or no-one in all creation.

In the name of the One who enriches us all, Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Raymond C. Van Leewen, "Ecclesiastes: Introduction", in *The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, c1989, p. 987.

<sup>ii</sup> *Bono & Eugene Peterson on the Psalms* [documentary film] Fuller Studio, [2016].  
<https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/bono-eugene-peterson-psalms/>

<sup>iii</sup> Stephen Shakespeare, *Prayers for an Inclusive Church*, Canterbury Press, 2008, p. 102.