



Sunday, 4 August 2019 – Trinity 7
Sermon for 10.00am Eucharist at St Andrew's Parish Church Guernsey
Readings: Ecclesiastes 1: 2, 12-14 2:18-23 & Gospel St Luke 12: 13-21

Given by Rev Juliette E C Robilliard

“Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher,
Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.”

So, what do you think?

So began Margaret's Old Testament lesson from Ecclesiastes. What did the rest of you think of it? Was it the most uplifting experience of your life or, the most depressing reading you've ever heard? This is the first time I've preached on this reading from Ecclesiastes and Bible-thumping stuff it is too! Why was the Teacher, who wrote Ecclesiastes, so weary; so pessimistic and finding everything so meaningless? Has he been suffering from the equivalent of BREXIT? But enough of this frivolity because, the Teacher would surely say that this too is vanity!

What about human achievements?

If you remember my sermon of a fortnight ago when I teasingly lampooned husbands in general, maybe Ecclesiastes is doing similar to the Israelites. In the first few verses he is deliberately trashing human amusements, power, security and wisdom: in short, he's sending it all up. For all that, I think Ecclesiastes is written rather poignantly even wistfully craving human fulfilment but finding none. The Teacher is pointing up the utter futility of peoples' "deeds done under the sun" and the emptiness of those human achievements.

Can bad can it get?

Can this reading get more depressing? Yes, it can! The Teacher hasn't finished with us yet. Warming to his theme he tells us that even his own endeavours, though he believes in God, have wearied him. Why? Because those who will come after him will reap the reward of everything, he has set up so judiciously but 'Will they be wise or will they be foolish?'

Now the upside

Today's short reading misses how Ecclesiastes develops his message in the ensuing chapters of the book. How God gives us a season for every facet of life and that if we seek to serve him, life will be the richer for it. This morning's reading, therefore, is deliberately emphasising human vulnerability as without God's goodness and his trustworthy reliability life is meaningless and full of vanity. So, what happened next?

Fast forward

Let's turn to the Gospel to see if the Israelites had learnt anything from Ecclesiastes? Jesus too is addressed as 'Teacher' by a man, in the crowd. He recognises that Jesus is wise and tries to use that wisdom to his own advantage. The man is thoroughly disgruntled

with his lot. That's a familiar theme! It seems that his brother has been left a goodly inheritance but he himself has received none and so, he wants Jesus to direct the brother to divvy up the dosh. Jesus does no such thing.

Judge for yourself

The best teachers are those who teach us how to think, not what to think: instead of a lecture, Jesus uses a parable as a means of enabling those who listen to form their own judgement on the matter. Although, Jesus is addressing the question raised by the aggrieved brother, if Jesus' comments were to be heard and received by the wealthy brother then potentially, he might well have been listening too. If so, Jesus' response is masterful, for it speaks to both brothers equally.

The best sort of riches

To the questioner the message is not to chase after riches that are only of temporary worth: far better to lay up eternal riches in heaven. By contrast, the wealthy brother would be able to associate with the image of the rich man whose wealth generates even more BUT, then comes the crunch, in the parable that night the rich man's life will be forfeit. Did the wealthy brother have a light bulb moment? "What is that happened to me? Who would get my inheritance then? Maybe ... that would be my brother!"

Did they live happily ever after?

As the brothers fade into the background, let's speculate briefly as to what might have happened next. Did they walk home together? Did the wealthy man put his arm around his brother's shoulder and, did he say, "D'you know what I've more than enough, let me share my inheritance with you." And did the younger brother reply "No! I should never have asked: I'm so sorry." And did Jesus smile, thinking, "These are riches of reconciliation after my own Father's heart." We can't know, but someone, maybe one of the brothers, recognised the great wisdom of the parable and shared it with Luke who documented it and so, we benefit from it today.

What about us?

We are urged not to fret about wealth: it's lack or its plenty, for as Jesus says, "Life does not consist in the abundance of possessions". And, I'm sure Ecclesiastes would agree with Jesus that being "rich towards God", is far better than a wealth of vanity! So, what happens next? How vain or rich towards God are we feeling today?

Amen.