

MONDAY
30 MARCH
 Susannah 1-9, 15-17, 19-30, 33-62
 [or 41b-62] or
 Joshua 2:1-14
 Psalm 23
 John 8:1-11

TUESDAY
31 MARCH
 Numbers 21:4-9
 Psalm 102:1-3, 16-23
 John 8:21-30

WEDNESDAY
1 APRIL
 Daniel 3:14-20, 24-25, 28
 Canticle:
 Bless the Lord
 John 8:31-42

THURSDAY
2 APRIL
 Genesis 17:3-9
 Psalm 105:4-9
 John 8:51-end

FRIDAY
3 APRIL
 Jeremiah 20:10-13
 Psalm 18:1-6
 John 10:31-end

SATURDAY
4 APRIL
 Ezekiel 37:21-end
 Canticle:
 Jeremiah 31:10-13
 or Psalm 121
 John 11:45-end

REFLECTION

s Passiontide begins,

A Monday's readings seem almost ironic – a story about an adulterous woman and a prostitute! But "passion" in this sense refers to suffering rather than erotic love. In the truest sense of the saying, love hurts.



Moving towards Holy Week and Easter, we recall the sacrificial, suffering love of Jesus. It wasn't, and isn't, easy to understand. On Tuesday Jesus expresses his frustration at people's lack of understanding. "Why do I speak to you at all?" he asks. The holier-than-thou attitude of his listeners, priding themselves on being sons of Abraham rather than children of God, influenced their treatment of an adulterous woman, although a man in the same position might well get off scot free.

In his reaction to the woman's imminent stoning, Jesus shows God's mercy and forgiveness and gives her a chance to begin again. That is the liberating truth that he mentions on Wednesday. But on Thursday and Friday people's persistent failure to understand almost leads to Jesus himself being stoned.

The week closes on another note of irony, when Caiaphas the high priest says that it is better for one man to die for the people than for the whole nation to be destroyed. It is, indeed, better – for all God's people, including sinful men and women, prostitutes and priests.

PRAYER

Merciful God, we thank you that your Son speaks to those who do not understand.
 His sacrifice helps us to begin to fathom the depth and breadth of your love.
 May this Passiontide deepen our understanding, and increase our love for our Saviour, in whose name we pray.

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THE BOOKS OF THE BIBLE

PART XXI – ECCLESIASTES – AN UNSETTLING BOOK

Richard Greatrex takes the baton to continue our book-by-book series about the Bible.

Ecclesiastes is rather like a porcupine thrust into the canon of scripture – it doesn't quietly fit into any category. Its message is both muscular and sinuous, its text full of barbs that goad the reader into an ongoing, unsettling process of learning, and nobody seems comfortable in its presence.

Ostensibly, Ecclesiastes lays out the life-knowledge of a post-exilic Jewish sage, known only as "Qoheleth", the "Teacher", and so it sits warily alongside Proverbs and Job as wisdom literature. Like them, it attempts to make sense of life based on observation and practical experience, focusing on human nature, offering a path for successful living.

Qoheleth's opening words are stark, startling and memorable – "Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity" – spiking our complacency at the outset, before robustly coaxing us through twelve short chapters of collected and at times contradictory sayings that further challenge our preconceptions of work, pleasure and meaningful existence.

With God, creator and judge, a silver thread fleetingly glimpsed through the dark weavings of human endeavour and written at a time before the possibility of life after death had been formed into Jewish doctrine, Ecclesiastes can be perceived as unremittingly bleak. Additionally, Qoheleth's repeated refrain, that all is vanity, vapour on the wind, that human work is toil, a wearying distraction diminishing life, that wisdom and folly are but a breath apart, for all die in the end, seems only to underscore the message of oppressive absurdity.

But Qoheleth is no one-dimensional preacher. He acknowledges that life is messy – the good get punished while the bad prosper, the fruits of our toil sometimes end up in the pockets of others and wisdom doesn't have all the answers. Yet he also chimes with contemporary concepts of mindfulness when he reminds us "Better is a handful with quiet than two handfuls with toil", cautioning us to live in the moment and to appreciate the life, the loves, the creation that God has given us.

Richard Greatrex is a parish priest, bookseller and author from Somerset.

LIVE the WORD

SUSTAINING YOU THROUGH THE WEEK

Edited by
 Caroline Hodgson
 and
 Heather Smith

and does not
 either children also,
 her husband also,
 preachers do not
 but you surpass them
 McCharm is deceptive, and
 but a woman who for
 be praised.
 10 Come her the reward she
 and let her words be
 the city gate.

Ecclesiastes

Meaningless
 of the Teacher," son of David,
 fathers.

see the rest of it
 what has been done
 there is nothing for
 us, have nothing of it

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Fifth week of Lent

Monday 30 March to
 Saturday 4 April
 2020

WEEK