

Thursday 13th August 2020

“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless. What do people gain from all their labours at which they toil under the sun? Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever.”

Ecclesiastes 1:2-4

The book of Ecclesiastes seems a puzzling addition to the Old Testament canon. The God of Ecclesiastes seems detached from mankind, notwithstanding the epilogue (possibly added later) *“Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgement, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.”* (Eccl. 12:13-14). The Hebrew word used for God in Ecclesiastes is Elohim, the more distant creator God of Genesis as opposed to Yahweh who presented himself to Moses *“I am the Lord”* (Ex. 6:3). With God so remote, Ecclesiastes seems to present a fairly hopeless view of the world.

Wisdom literature was a common genre both in the Middle East at this time and, later, in Greece. These writings were typically a form of self-help manual answering the question “What is a good life and how do you lead it?”

But whereas many of these writings (and in particular the Greek philosophical works) offer consistency and certainty, laying out a roadmap as to how to proceed, Ecclesiastes instead embraces ambiguity.

But, for all that, Ecclesiastes presents a readily relatable view of human experience. The book of Proverbs is altogether more authoritative, describing the works and fortunes of the wicked and the just; but what about everybody in between those two extremes (i.e. most of us!)? Ecclesiastes seems to answer that for us. Life is not so simplistic; following the rules does not lead to success; one’s fate does not immediately seem to relate to what one does.

“Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favour to the men of skill; but time and chance happen to them all.” (Eccl. 9:11)

Perhaps we understand things a little more clearly when we revisit the opening lines of the book. The Hebrew word translated as “empty” or “meaningless” is *“hebel”* which carries with it the connotation of breath or wispy smoke. For example, the same word is used in Job 7:16 *“my days are a breath”* and in Proverbs 21:6 *“the getting of treasures by a lying tongue is a fleeting vapour”*. The life of man is as fleeting as a breath. *“For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his insubstantial life, which he passes like a shadow.”* (Eccl. 6:12)

Trying to make sense of this is futile. It is like *“shepherding the wind”* (Eccl. 2:26). Man trying to figure out why the wicked prosper and the good suffer is like grasping at smoke.

But, then, in the verses immediately following (Eccl. 3:1ff), there is the beginning of some sense of order:

*“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens:
a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,
a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build...”*

The Good News Translation translates the first line thus:

“Everything that happens in this world happens at the time God chooses:”

We cannot escape the cycle of life and death and, within it, everything looks as chaotic to mortal man as leaves blowing in the wind; but that does not mean that the God of history does not have a plan, albeit it is one that we cannot discern. We cannot *"shepherd the wind"*; but our God is one who *"appears on the wings of the wind"* (2 Sam. 22:11), who *"makes the clouds his chariot"* (Ps. 104:3) and *"answered Job out of the whirlwind"* (Job 38:1). The contrast is clear.

The book of Ecclesiastes is an honest reflection of life from a human viewpoint. Its appearance within the Old Testament, despite its thoroughly human perspective, is challenging. But we must not make the mistake of thinking that its inclusion should be taken to signify that life is without meaning. God has a plan and what happens does so at the time of his choosing. However, as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:13 *"What we see now is like a dim image in a mirror; then we shall see face-to-face. What I know now is only partial; then it will be complete - as complete as God's knowledge of me."*