

Epiphany 7
24/2/2019

Mark the Evangelist

Ecclesiastes 1:1-18
Psalm 37
Luke 6:27-38

Love, for no reason

In a sentence:

Love is not a technique, not a means to an end; 'just do it'

We have all at some time reached out to touch the lowest part of a hanging mobile, then watched as it bobs and turns above us, each of the arms and hanging baubles twisting to re-adjust under the extra momentum we have just introduced to the system. A mobile is a marvellous demonstration of a network of balanced forces. To change a weight or the length of some of the supporting arms is to change the way the mobile will settle. To simply remove one of the weights would be to see much of it collapse.

A hanging mobile provides us with a marvellous metaphor for the Christian Scriptures. The predominant metaphor we have for the Bible is, of course, 'book'. It clearly is a book, but with the *notion* of a book comes a sense of how the elements hold together – the concept of a narrative, a movement from a beginning to an end. This is a helpful way of understanding how the Scriptures work but it is not the only way.

Let us consider, instead, that the Scriptures are not so much a linear narrative but a mobile on which hangs the 66 books which make up our Bible. In this understanding, it doesn't matter where each is hung: they are no longer 'in order'. Rather, they are hung in such a way that they balance each other out. Now we no longer have a more-or-less continuous unfolding of a history but a set of interacting accounts of life under God. If we change one of them – not by adding or subtracting content but by giving it more weight as we improve our *understanding* of its testimony – then that extra weight requires that everything else in the system shifts accordingly, in order to keep the balance.

On this understanding, every Scriptural book impacts upon every other scriptural book: Genesis upon Revelation, Song of Songs upon Romans, Ecclesiastes upon Luke's Gospel.

And this brings us to our project for the next couple of months. The book of Ecclesiastes, for most of us, sits rather strangely in the Bible. To many it is pessimistic, nihilistic, acquiescent, world-weary – none of which seems appropriate given the apparent orientation of the whole of sweep of the Scriptures towards the hope of joy in Christ. This is probably why, in the version of the lectionary we use, only one passage of Ecclesiastes appears: on New Year's Day we might hear the poem of chapter 3, 'for everything there is a season...'

But there it is – Ecclesiastes as a whole – the Bible. On the metaphor of the book, we might think we can exclude it by saying that it is *overtaken* by the flow of the story, that Jesus is an answer to Ecclesiastes, an overcoming of his conclusions. But we can only say this on the basis of that particular metaphor. The metaphor of the Bible as a hanging mobile – a system of mutually affecting testimonies – calls for a different reading. If we exclude Ecclesiastes, why do we imagine that we understand the gospel of the crucified

and risen Jesus, on which Ecclesiastes acts? It might be not so much that Jesus overtakes Ecclesiastes as that Jesus echoes him. If this were the case, would it not expand enormously our understanding of the cross? Could there be a relationship between the central theme of Ecclesiastes – ‘vanity’ – and the central theme of the gospels – the cross? Could we dare to imagine ‘the vanity of the cross’? That it seems so impious to do suggests that it might make a good title for a Good Friday sermon!

As with all things which really matter, this will be a matter of definitions. Let us, then, look to what Ecclesiastes means when he speaks of vanity, and consider what this might have to say about we have heard from Jesus in today’s set reading.

‘Vanity’ is the standard translation in Ecclesiastes of the Hebrew word ‘*hebel*’. And it is an unfortunate translation, because the modern sense of the English word is too narrow and specific to capture Ecclesiastes’ point. To speak of vanity is to speak of self-absorption, narcissism. Socially this is an empty, pointless pursuit, and such emptiness is part of what Ecclesiastes is getting at but there is rather more. In fact, he uses the word in several different ways. If we try to find a common thread which strings his various uses together it is something like the notion, ‘ungraspable’. The literal meaning of the Hebrew is ‘mist’ or ‘vapour’. Ecclesiastes extends this metaphorically to characterise our attempts to make sense of how the world works. For he finds ‘life under the sun’ to be ungraspable, incomprehensible. The unjust are rewarded when the just are not. We toil to gather the things we need, then die and someone who has not worked for them squanders them. A buffoon might become king. A good man can be crucified. This is not, of course, always the case. Yet Ecclesiastes sees that we cannot *guarantee* tomorrow. We cannot reliably extrapolate, we cannot confidently manipulate. There is no clear rhyme or reason to the world. And so there is no real movement, no progress: there is nothing new under the sun.

We will hear more of this as we consider Ecclesiastes’ reflections over the next couple of months but for now we will take a first test on his declaration of vanity – not by discussing abstractly whether or not he is a depressed pessimist but by turning to the gospel to see what resonance we might find between Ecclesiastes and what Jesus says and represents there.

Jesus puts to his disciples – and presumably also to *us* – ‘love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, turn the other cheek, don’t worry about who has your stuff’ (Luke 6.27-38). These are confronting commands. And because they *are* so confronting, there wells up in us the question, *Why*.

But there is no why. Jesus makes no promises in relation to this other than that you can expect no better than what you give.

We ask Why? because we know we might receive less than we give. The Why hears Jesus’ commandment as a means to an end. But Jesus promises no end. Chances are we’ll end up like he did – the cross is never far from his teaching. Asking ‘Why’ turns ethics into a technique, a method by which we obtain an outcome.

Yet this is precisely what Ecclesiastes says we cannot have. When we act we cannot guarantee the consequences. Calculation and prediction work in simple systems like natural science (at least up to a point) but they don’t work in history, in real human existence.

We will hear Ecclesiastes say again and again that there are things to be done, even if we can't know that we'll do them well or that we are doing the right thing. We should just do them, nevertheless. Jesus doesn't say this *explicitly* but it is there in the starkness of the command. Why one would do as Jesus commands is ungraspable, is beyond the capacities of any reason.

To put it differently, love is not a method. It guarantees no outcome, and it might be crucified. Doing to others as we would have them do to us is no guarantee that they will do to us in the same way.

This, I expect, is more than most of us want to hear. It is ungraspable, incomprehensible. We tend to love 'in order that' – in order that the loved one might change. But Jesus adds the disorienting 'and expect nothing in return'; we could imagine that from the pen of Ecclesiastes (cf. Eccles 11.1-6).

This is not pessimism. It is a different handle on life – that life does not have reliable handles. Ethics – how we act – is not about technique, is not means to an end. It is about character, about the way in which we conduct ourselves in the world.

Love, Jesus, says, because there is really nothing else which matters.

Love, expecting nothing in return.

Love, for no reason.
