

Lent 4  
31/3/2019

Mark the Evangelist

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11  
Psalm 32  
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Against wisdom (and foolishness)

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*In a sentence:*

*Not what we do, but what God has done, is the heart of the matter*

Qohelet is traditionally identified as King Solomon, not least because he claims to have been king in Jerusalem and the book is clearly a work of considerable wisdom, for which Solomon himself was famous. There are, however, other hints in the book which undermine this identification. Whatever the case, our writer was certainly a person of considerable means, and so he resolves to 'make a test of pleasure'. He performs great works, acquires slaves and beautiful things and people: 'I kept from my heart no pleasure.' Yet, for all, that he determines again, 'all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.'

His efforts then continue beyond what we heard this morning, although now in a different direction: he turns from material indulgence to wisdom and work.

*<sup>12</sup>So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly... <sup>13</sup>Then I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness. <sup>14</sup>The wise have eyes in their head, but fools walk in darkness. Yet I perceived that the same fate befalls all of them. <sup>15</sup>Then I said to myself, "What happens to the fool will happen to me also; why then have I been so very wise?" And I said to myself that this also is vanity.*

*<sup>17</sup>So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a chasing after wind. <sup>18</sup>I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me <sup>19</sup>—and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? ... <sup>22</sup>What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? <sup>23</sup>For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity.*

In the end, then, both profligacy and wisdom with serious hard work lead him to the same conclusion, to which he will return several times: all is vanity, and so

*<sup>24</sup>There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God; <sup>25</sup>for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?*

What we have heard from Qohelet today has surprising parallels to Jesus' parable of the two sons. In both there is extravagance, and hard work, and eating and drinking.

The parable is familiar to most of us – the irresponsible younger son who eventually comes to his senses, the waiting father who welcomes him home and the complaints of the older and hard-working brother about his father's behaviour. The last time we considered this parable (March 3 2016), we noted that the two sons, despite who looks to be right and who wrong in the story, related to the father in the same way: according to an economy of exchange rather than of gift. Both are concerned with what the father

owes them, the one hoping to earn a servant's living and the other hoping to prove worthy of his inheritance.

The action of the father, however, reveals that – in Qohelet's terms – each invests in a vain chasing after the wind. The foolishness of the younger son's early behaviour is self-evident. Then he comes to his senses and wisely plots a course back to the safety of the family home, only to find that he has misread his situation. There is no folly in the behaviour of the older son but he employs much the same wisdom as his younger brother, which also indicates a misreading his own situation. In neither case do either receive what they think they are due, *as* their due, as an *earned* reward. The younger discovers that he need not earn his place with his father, and the older hears that he will inherit regardless of what he does.

The surprise here is that, *despite* their efforts, both in fact *catch* the wind, the 'wind' being here the father's favour. Or perhaps, they are caught up in that wind.

And so we stumble upon a surprising amorality in the story of the two brothers, despite the strong moral overtones in the contrast between their behaviour and often drawn in reflections on this parable.

This amorality is in that, while wisdom is to foolishness as light is to darkness (as Qohelet admits, 2.14), both the foolish and the wise end up in the same place. A problem many have with Qohelet, and which will only be exacerbated in next week's reflection, is that it's not quite clear where right and wrong are located in the world as he describes it. More to the point, he questions whether we *can* actually locate them (cf. 6.12; 8.1,17). And, if *that* is the case, how do we orient ourselves towards the right, the good?

For Qohelet, this orientation occurs in what he calls 'enjoyment' – there is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink and find enjoyment in their toil, for this also is from God (2.24). This is not hedonism; it is life lived with a 'serious lightness'. This is a hard-earned wisdom which allows that it might still be found, in the end, to have been foolish.

What this means, practically, is the pursuit of life 'as if' life depended on the pursuit, but knowing that it does *not*. It means hard work, loving service, costly sacrifice, careful consideration and refinement – in our relationships, in our discipleship, in our worship, in our studies and vocations. Qohelet calls us to a serious life, a 'wise' life.

But a life of serious lightness is all these things in the spirit of freedom – the freedom of those *who already have what they work for*.

What Qohelet sees we already have is life and God's blessing on what we do (9.7). This he allows us to mark in the time of enjoyment, symbolised in the feast.

For Jesus' parable today, the terms are different but the point is the same. The irresponsibility of the younger son and then his attempt to manipulate his father on the one hand, and the unhappy efforts of the older son on the other, are both shown to be far from the heart of things.

The heart of things is the father's very own heart, which claims both of them regardless of what they do. This, too, is marked by a feast – to which the foolish and the wise both find themselves welcomed. The feast is the sign of the folly of those who are loved by God but do not yet know what that means.

While we are so concerned with what we are doing, the gospel draws attention to what has been *done*: we have been begun in the Father and completed in the Jesus the Son. All that remains in our meantime – in this life under the sun – is that we open ourselves to the Spirit for which we prayed in our opening hymn: the ‘blessed unction’ which is ‘comfort, life and fire of love’, which anoints and cheers our mortality, and teaches us to know our beginning and our end – here, in God.

And so we break bread and bless the cup, in order that we might begin to learn this lesson, to God’s greater glory and our richer humanity. Amen.

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