

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-26 and Luke 12:13-21

In our reading from Ecclesiastes, everything the Teacher, who is believed to be King Solomon, has found in life is vanity. Vanity. What comes to mind when you hear that word? I remember the dressing table with a mirror that my mother fashioned for me out of an old dresser. It was quite beautiful, but, as its name suggests, its purpose was for creating external beauty. A source of vain behavior... and isn't being vain a trait that is looked down upon? I found an interesting take in the Miriam Webster Dictionary that quoted Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, in which the character Mary opines: "Vanity and pride are different things, though the words are often used synonymously. A person may be proud without being vain. Pride relates more to our opinion of ourselves, vanity to what we would have others think of us." So when we originally hear the reading of this text don't we think that everything we accomplish is based on the other's opinion of us?

Wait a minute... isn't there another definition for the word vain? Something done in vain, without purpose. If we go back to the Hebrew root of the word that has been translated as vanity, we find it means "vapor, a breath of air, a puff of wind". In other words, without purpose. It is something that cannot be held onto, something we see for but an instant and then it vanishes. That is how Solomon was using the word... his work wasn't something he could hold onto. Everything he did to set up the kingdom of Israel is going to go to his successor, and he will have no control over the direction it takes from there. He's come to the realization that what he has done as his life's work is not nearly as valuable as he thought it was. We may want to beg to differ with him, because, in my opinion, Solomon was a great king filled with wisdom from God. Yet, as I stated before, realistically he had no control over what his successor did with his life's work.

This may sound depressing, but honestly, it is a realistic way of looking at life. Solomon ends up with the conclusion that there is nothing better for humans to do than to eat, drink, and enjoy what we may have... he repeats this idea in different ways seven times throughout the book of Ecclesiastes. Honestly, that may be easy for a rich king to say, he doesn't have to worry about keeping a roof over his head, or where his next meal is coming from. Yet, when one has to consider this, the work they do may not be fulfilling, but only a means to a paycheck. And so Solomon's advice boils down to enjoy life, it goes quickly.

As Christ followers we accept life as a gift from God. We do not look to wealth, power, pleasure and status as a measurement of success. No, as Christ followers we view life as a divine gift. In his musings, Solomon reached the position of asking, "What's the point of life?"

Most of the books in the Old Testament have a simple cause and effect when considering human life and its relationship to God, but Solomon, a writer in the tradition of the Wisdom literature, questioned this assumption. The usual trend in the Old Testament, running through into the New Testament and even today, leads some people to still believe that the bad things that happen to people are the direct result of sinful ways. If somebody fell on hard times, people assumed that they had sinned in some terrible way and that God was punishing that person. Individual people who were poor or who were sick were automatically regarded as sinners and were pushed to the margins of society, and most of the Old Testament is written with this outlook.

But two books in particular, disagree. The book of Job and the book of Ecclesiastes both argue against these ideas and the authors each use their personal circumstances to illustrate their points in different ways. By his own admission the writer of Ecclesiastes had worked hard and was wealthy, but he had discovered a lack of purpose in life. "Vanity," he proclaims, "all is vanity." And he goes on to explain his words. He tells his readers how hard he toiled and how much he hated his work. Then he wonders why on earth he bothered to work so hard, since the only people who will really reap the benefits of his hard work are those who come after him.

Solomon was a man of wisdom and he used his wisdom and his knowledge to the fullest, yet again not he himself, but those who come after him will benefit. "I gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labors under the sun," he complains, "because sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. This is vanity and a great evil." And he adds, "What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? 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."

Solomon seems to be asking. "What's the point of it all?" Later in the book he realizes that the rain falls on both the good and the bad, just as the sun shines on both the good and the bad. He feels that there's no point in developing wisdom or in amassing wealth, for worldly pleasures eventually lose their shine and in the end everyone dies. There is no difference in death between a rich man and a poor man, between a wise man and a fool. Solomon is asking the question, one that has been asked throughout the centuries. Why are we here? What is the point of life?

Jesus asked a similar question when he told the story of the rich farmer whose land yielded such wealth that he tore down his barns and built bigger and better barns to store his vast yield of grain. But that very night the farmer died, and all his years of work served only to benefit his descendants, for in death worldly riches are worth nothing. What was the point of amassing all that wealth? What did the farmer gain from it?

Solomon never found a full answer to his question. Right at the end of his book, ch. 12:13-14 he says, "The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil." He seems to be saying that human beings should respond to God because God will judge them on their every action.

But Jesus offers a much fuller answer. Jesus tells us to be on our guard against our human tendency towards greed, because storing up treasure for ourselves on this earth never brings happiness. True happiness is only to be found in the presence of God, so the nearer to God we find ourselves, the happier we will be. We can all discover what life is really about by responding to God. And then we'll discover that we have enormous wealth, but wealth of a different kind. We have treasure in heaven.

And that, really, is a description of eternal life. Not necessarily life after death, although it will be that too, but life on this earth which is full of delight and happiness and joy and love and deep inner peace. Solomon never quite discovered that. But then, he didn't have the advantage of Jesus showing him how to attain eternal life, so he never quite discovered life's purpose.

We do have that advantage, and so we can discover the purpose of life for ourselves. It's to glorify and to love God, and love your neighbor and through that, to discover eternal life for ourselves. And we won't find that through greed, but through sharing. We won't find it through meanness, but through generosity. We won't find it through hatred, but through love. We won't find it through human means, but through God.

God is waiting to pour his riches upon us. Let's receive them with open arms. All glory be to God.