

## Reflection: Vanity, Folly and Priorities.

*Ecclesiastes 1:2 and 12-14; and 2:18-23. Colossians 3:1-11. Luke 12:13-21.*

There is a respected commentator on lectionary readings [Jane Williams, aka Lady Williams of Oystermouth], to whom I often turn for ideas. She says of today's three readings "they are depressing; so brace yourselves". I can see where she is coming from; but I don't altogether agree with her. The texts are all challenging and taken together and out of context they could be a recipe for despair. But let us look for some unifying themes which may shed more positive light on their meaning.

Ecclesiastes, together with Proverbs and the Song of Solomon, is one of the so-called "Wisdom" Books of Hebrew Scripture. Its opening words have become part of our cultural heritage, even for those who seldom read the Bible: "Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher. All is vanity!" Interestingly our Gospel reading is often bandied around in a similar way, albeit misquoted: "Eat, drink and be merry, for [tomorrow you shall die]". Of course Jesus said no such thing and the popular version, connoting self-indulgence and negative pleasure seeking and hedonism with no hope for the future beyond this life, is the very opposite of what Jesus was teaching. But we shall return to that.

In fairness today's reading from Ecclesiastes taken in isolation **could** seem to be a song of futility and despair. The writer seems to be saying: What is the point of seeking wisdom? "It is an unhappy business that God has given human beings to be busy with". "For all is vanity and a chasing after wind". Even if the Teacher passes on the baton to future generations, that is vanity "because one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it". How self-centred is that? It is all pretty bleak stuff. Repeatedly the author of Ecclesiastes seems to be saying that pursuing a quest for Wisdom is like wandering aimlessly in a maze or labyrinth where every turn one takes leads to a dead-end. He seems to contradict far more hopeful passages in the Book of Proverbs which celebrate Wisdom as God's life-force who frolicked playfully with God at the very moment of Creation, who permeates every moment of our existence. Here Wisdom is far from dusty and remote: "On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out"  
*[Proverbs 8:1-4]*

I believe that, taken as a whole, Ecclesiastes is far more optimistic than would appear from today's lectionary extract. Chapter Three begins with the beautiful poetic message that "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die; a

time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted” [3:1-8] If we blunder into the dead-ends of the maze, it is because we are seeking Wisdom on our own terms and human time scales, and not God’s. There is “a time to seek and a time to lose; a time to keep and a time to throw away”. If in trust and patience you “cast your bread upon the waters, after many days you will get it back” [11:1]

In our Epistle reading Paul is proclaiming a new life in Christ and a new quest for Wisdom: “Seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth”. We are told to strip off the old self and to clothe ourselves with the new self “which is being renewed in knowledge, according to the image of its creator”. Just as in Ecclesiastes, we are called to a quest for knowledge and Wisdom; but unlike Ecclesiastes the quest is not barren or hopeless..

So how does this relate to our Gospel reading and the parable of the Rich Fool? Throughout Scripture we read of folly, the antithesis of Wisdom. Fools are arrogant. They trust in their own narrow perception of wise conduct and refuse to accept guidance or advice. We read in Proverbs [26:5] that they are “wise in their own eyes”, but their folly leads to self-destruction. This is a theme repeatedly picked up by Jesus in his parables. The foolish builder lays his foundation on sand and not on rock [Matthew 7:24-27]; the foolish bridesmaid does not bring enough oil to keep her lamp alight [Matthew 25:1-13]; and in today’s Gospel it is the foolishly smug farmer who builds new barns to store his abundant crops whilst he takes his ease and gives no thought to the future: “And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink and be merry”.

Throughout Scripture and parallel to these themes of foolishness are the warnings against misjudgement and losing any sense of value, either by undervaluing goodness or by overvaluing the trivial and ephemeral . So, just as in Genesis [25:29-34] Esau gave up his precious birthright for the proverbial “mess of pottage”, our rich fool simply places value on his short-term comforts. He tries to store up treasures for himself but is not “rich toward God” or indeed to posterity and God’s Creation. I suppose that the greatest of such parable is the Great Dinner, also in Luke [15:15-24]. We should all rejoice at the prospect of eating bread in the Kingdom of God, but most people decline the invitation. They have their own priorities; the recently purchased piece of land, the five yoke of oxen, or the distractions of a recent marriage. They make their choices; and to them (and perhaps to some of us) those choices seemed sensible at the time. However, they undervalue the rich privilege of an invitation to the divine banquet, or overvalue their everyday concerns. None who decline the invitation will taste its blessings. Jesus is saying that we have freedom of choice but that we need to get our priorities and allegiances right. “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where

moths and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven" *[Matthew 6:19-21]*.

So how are we to find a bench-mark for wisdom as opposed to folly? How do we assess the value of the choices before us? By what standard do we assess our priorities? All three of today's readings urge us to look to God; to respect his time-scale, to clothe ourselves in his knowledge, to be rich towards God. We must try to model our actions on the image of Jesus and hopefully draw on the values instilled in us by his example and teaching. He is our road map, although perhaps not giving the rigid guidance of a computerised route planner or Sat-Nav; "at the next roundabout take the third exit". The guidance and example of Jesus is more like a magnetic compass, rooted in our faith and Christian experience. Constantly it is adjusting and re-orientating us in the right direction and away from dead-ends, the false turns in our quest through life's labyrinth.

As St Augustine prayed:

"O God you are our refuge and our shield. You made us for yourself. Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you. Send your Spirit to open our minds to hear your word; to open our hearts to hear you afresh; and to open our lives to follow your will".

Amen