

The book of Ecclesiastes from which we read from this morning has a unique tone within the canon of Scripture. Amongst the books of the Bible there are a few main archetypes: history, prophecy, gospel, epistle etc. etc. There are also the books which are identified as wisdom literature. These include Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. These books tend to have a more practical than theological focus. They are engaged with the life of man and his place in the world. This of course must include some discussion of God. However, the Wisdom Books are often working backwards from the experience of mankind to contemplation of God, rather than starting with a truth about God and moving to a discussion of man's relation to Him.

This trajectory is perhaps the most pronounced in the book of Ecclesiastes. The book of Ecclesiastes is a meditation on the futility of man's life. The existentialist philosophy of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is in many places just retracing the steps of Ecclesiastes. The author contemplates the life of man in light of the fact that all men die. The vanity of man's earthly pursuits becomes apparent. Nothing that man achieves or acquires will save him, in the end. Noone he knows, nothing he does will allow him to escape from the clutches of death. And so who reaps the reward of all a man's labor? Someone other than the laborer. Who is benefits from his knowledge and wisdom? Noone. What does a man gain from all of his achievements? Struggle, pain and finally death. This is what the preacher in Ecclesiastes sees. In the section we read this morning, he describes the great lengths he went to in order to acquire wealth and pleasurable things. He devoted himself to happiness, laughter and delight. He worked hard, employing all of his wisdom and cleverness to gain anything he could desire. Yet, in the end he despaired of all this work. The pleasant things stopped satisfying because the knowledge of his own death loomed over everything he did. "For there is a man whose labour is in wisdom, and in knowledge, and in equity; yet to a man that hath not laboured therein shall he leave it for his portion. This also is vanity and a great evil. For what hath man of all his labour, and of the vexation of his heart, wherein he hath laboured under the sun? For all his days are sorrows, and his travail grief; yea, his heart taketh not rest in the night. This is also vanity."

What is the point of all this? Why break down every aspect of our lives and call them vain? Are we supposed to all be monks? Is the the conclusion of Ecclesiastes? No, not exactly. It may seem strange, but the book of Ecclesiastes is about hope.

Because of the ambiguity of the English language, it is very easy to misunderstand hope. We often use the word hope to mean anything that we are looking forward to or desiring for our futures. However, the Christian hope, the virtue of hope, is inherently attached to eternity. Hope is a fixed attention on Heaven. To hope for good health in life is good and fine. However, it is not the virtue of hope. To look to heaven and comfort of God in the midst of bad health, that is true hope. To await with patient expectation, not for all your wildest dreams to come true in this life, but for the Kingdom of Heaven.

This is not to say that it is wrong to desire good things in life. It is not wrong to look for fruitful labor, love in your family, good health, and peace in the nation. All of these things are good gifts of God and are true delights. In fact, these are all things that the author of Ecclesiastes says are worthwhile. However, he at other times says they are vanity and pointless. Why? How can they be both good and worthwhile as well as vanity and worthless.

The difference lies in where one places one's hope. If your hope is set on these earthly delights, they are vanity and frustration. If you look for happiness, wealth and earthly wisdom to bring worth and meaning to your life, it is vanity. If your hope is set upon heaven, then the delights of this sojourn on earth are a welcome refreshment on the journey. A refreshment which is not the purpose of the journey. The book of Ecclesiastes ends with the judgement of God. The author meditates on the fact that we will all stand before God after we die. The final chapter of Ecclesiastes begins: "Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them;.. Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it... Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil."

And this brings us right to our second lesson- the encounter between Christ and the rich young ruler. It seems this man has taken to heart the conclusion of Ecclesiastes. He has kept the commandments of God from his youth up, he says. He is now interested in securing for himself eternal life, so that everything he has done and accomplished might not be vanity. He comes to Jesus, believing himself ready to be judged.

Yet Jesus sees right through to the heart of the man. He does not challenge his dubious claim to have kept all the commandments since his childhood. For Christ recognizes that though this man had perhaps followed the final exhortation of Ecclesiastes, he had not understood the point of the book. He still placed his hope in earthly things – in his riches. He expected to be able to continue his life of wealth and pleasure, and use that wealth to buy his way into Heaven. It is notable that this also is what the disciples believed. For after the rich man goes away Christ says, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. This parable may be so familiar to us now that it seems obvious, but to the disciples this was astonishing. They respond, "who then can be saved?" For they, like all of the people of that time, believed that the rich had the best chance to enter heaven. It was the rich who could buy the sacrifices needed to expunge their sin. It was the rich who could give to the temple such large sums of money. It was the rich who could employ teachers of the law and holy books for themselves and their families. If the rich could not enter heaven, then who could?

"But Jesus beheld them, and said unto them, 'with men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.'"

Put not your hope in the power and achievements of men. Put not your hope in the wealth and pleasures of this world. Do not expect to work your way to Heaven or buy your way into glory. These are vanities. It is only by God's power that we are made Holy, and it is only those whose Hope is in the Son of God who will finally rest in eternity with Him. "And Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

Last week, Fr. Chris led us to consider the work that God does in his people through suffering, quoting St. Augustine, "Let us understand that God is a physician, and that suffering is a medicine for salvation, not a punishment for damnation." The lessons last week encouraged us to have hope even in our suffering. In fact, to make use of the suffering we experience to fix our eyes on eternity – to remind us that this life is not our ultimate end. It is difficult to have hope in the midst of suffering. So often, our hope becomes merely that the suffering will end. But this is not true hope.

For what our lessons today are meant to teach, is that in the good and pleasant times, in our wealth and success, we are also tempted not to hope. When our suffering is past or not yet come upon us, we are tempted to trust in worldly goods. When God has blessed our work and our relationships, we are tempted to take our eyes off of him. The pleasures of this life stop reminding us of God's goodness and become gods in themselves. This also is vanity. Fix your eyes on heaven even in the pleasant times. Remind yourself, like the author of Ecclesiastes, of the passing faintness of this world. Remind yourself of death, that it might not come as a thief in the night and rob you while you sleep. *Memento mori*. Remember, you must die.

Let us then be enlivened by true Hope. Let us look to the eternal glory which is promised to us. Let us be diligent in our work as an expression of faithfulness and worship. Let us be steadfast in our loves because in so doing we love God. Let us be sacrificial in our service because in so doing we serve God. Let us be whole-hearted and grateful in our joy, for this is true thanksgiving. Let us also have courage in our suffering, for our hope in heaven is certain and sure. And let us be frequent in our prayers. For this my friends is how we fix our eyes upon heaven. How great and useful a mechanism for strengthening our hope is prayer. It is our way of returning our attention to eternity. Be faithful in prayer, and you will not fail to hope. How I wish I was more consistent and faithful in prayer. Yet even this too I can pray for. Let us pray together.

ALMIGHTY God, who alone gavest us the breath of life, and alone canst keep alive in us the holy desires thou dost impart; We beseech thee, for thy compassion's sake, to sanctify all our thoughts and endeavours; that we may neither begin an action without a pure intention nor continue it without thy blessing. And grant that, having the eyes of the mind opened to behold things invisible and unseen, we may in heart be inspired by thy wisdom, and in work be upheld by thy strength, and in the end be accepted of thee as thy faithful servants; through Jesus Christ our Saviour. *Amen*.