

Reflection for Saturday 26 September

In my reflection today I want to say something about this morning's Mass reading from the Book of Ecclesiastes, a book of the Old Testament, probably unknown to most of us. It is a strange book.

The name Ecclesiastes is Greek for someone who calls people together into an assembly. The person here is a religious leader and teacher. The name for this book in the Hebrew scriptures is Qoheleth which is the Hebrew equivalent of Ecclesiastes. He is probably a man who is wise, teaching the people knowledge, but carefully weighing, studying and arranging his words. The nearest we get to Qoheleth in English is "preacher" because the book is made up of mainly sayings or proverbs spoken to an audience. They are very much like a series of sermons.

In our reading this morning one of the subjects the Qoheleth raises is that of the meaning of life. All of his observations and deliberations have led him to the same conclusion: life is a sweet passing moment which ought to be savoured and enjoyed whilst it lasts. He also says and it is important to remember that the "days of darkness will be many." 11 vs8. Such a reminder ought not to dampen our pleasure in the light. Instead, the Qoheleth seems to say that an acute sense of the shortness of life should increase the extent to which we enjoy life while we still have it 11 vs7&8. He says the same thing about young people.

In vs 10 the Qoheleth says the young should enjoy themselves and turn aside from the sorrows of their minds and the troubles of their bodies. Young people should rejoice in their youth. They should do whatever their hearts and minds desire, but they should also remember that God will eventually "judge" them for what they do vs9. What the Qoheleth is saying here is that God wants us to enjoy the good things in life on the one hand, whilst on the other, God will eventually decide how well we have used our time "under the sun" meaning in his time.

Now we come to the last verse in today's first reading. "Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is Vanity." For vanity the Hebrew version uses "hebel," meaning "a puff of air" or "breath." The Greek Version uses the Latin equivalent of "vanitas," hence the English vanity. The word vanity has the basic meaning of "lacking in value" or "useless." The Greek, Latin and English miss the point. The Hebrew word "hebel, "puff of air" is right. The Qoheleth is saying that life on earth is valuable but it is like puff of air, transitory, gone in a flash. It should make us think about the way we live our lives.

How relevant that is to life today with all our present uncertainties, Covid-19 etc. We can take heart from our first reading from Ecclesiastes that all will pass in God's time. As Christians our permanent home is in heaven. Ecclesiastes gives us hope. Don't Give up.

Roger Watson