

SERMON FOR TRINITY 7 | 31.07.22

Ecclesiastes 1: 2, 12-14, 2: 18-23; Colossians 3: 1-11; St Luke 12: 13-21

Madge was funny. Not very tall and always with lots to say, whenever Madge was in the room, it lit up. I often wondered how her daughter Maureen coped with this 'off the wall' Yorkshire woman' but she just shrugged her shoulders and said, 'that's Mam!'

One of Madge's favourite pastimes was to go clothes shopping. It just so happened that a very large ASDA opened about that time and – so the story goes – Madge took the largest trolley she could find and proceeded to go from rail to rail putting whatever she fancied into the trolley until it was loaded to the very top. She would then go to the check-out – and leave the trolley there, walking out of the store with absolutely nothing in her hands.

Whatever is the point of that?, we would all ask, hardly believing that anyone would do such a thing. O, it just gave me pleasure for the hour I was there but I didn't really need anything...

Alan Bennett the playwright would tell that tale with much more skill than me and would go on to ruminate on the way so many lives are full of that kind of emptiness. As someone said on Friday, *what is the point of living. I've nothing to live for. I just spend my time paying bills; that's all there is.*

Our first reading is one of the most powerful in whole of the Old Testament - especially in the CEV version we heard today. It comes from the same tradition as the Book of Job. You will remember that Job and his family were as rich and contented as anyone could possibly be. And then without any warning the whole lot of taken away overnight – house, family, health, job – everything. The book is then split into sections where Job gets involved in long discussions/arguments with three of his so called 'friends'. Over the course of 42 chapters Job ruminates about whether there is something he, his ancestors or his family could have done to bring about these tragedies? As many of you know it is a demanding read but in the end we are left with no very satisfactory answer. Suffering is rarely the result of something we have done; it just happens. It is a mystery – with very little link between us and our past. All we are left with, Job discovers is not an answer as to why something happened – good or bad – but that our lives are about serving God, not for some reward but because that is what we were created for: to learn to love the God who made us.

The writer of Ecclesiastes takes this one stage further and says, *nothing we do means anything at all. It is all pointless.* More than that, he says that we

can't even rely on reading the right books, doing the right thing and being good decent human beings to make us happy. For him everything we experience is like a puff of air –a momentary, empty sensation which cannot ever satisfy our deepest desire for happiness. I am sure you will remember the most famous passage from Ecclesiastes chapter 3 which talks about *a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to scatter and a time to gather, a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak...* We can't settle to anything, chopping and changing our minds without any of it making us feel good. At best, says this wholly pessimistic teacher, like Madge's shopping trip, we may only get a momentary buzz from what we are doing before it too is taken away. Look for the consolations, however tiny they may be, because life is futile and no one will ever thank you for what you have done!

O dear, how gloomy and grim that all sounds – and yet there is a bit of us sitting in Church this morning which tends to agree with this view of life: *eat drink and merry for tomorrow we die* is not just in Ecclesiastes. it is the basis for the whole Epicurian philosophy!

So what do we make of Jesus' parable about the smug farmer who gloats over his amazingly rich harvest and plans to build even bigger barns and storehouses to store it all?

While there is a clear connection between Ecclesiastes' pessimism, Job's loss of his fortune and the farmer's sudden and tragic loss of his farm because he was to die, isn't there an even more interesting question behind this Gospel story?

If so I think it is this: it is our fear of what will happen to everything we have built up after we have gone? Who will inherit what we have managed to collect? And what will they do with it? Will they treasure these things like we did? Will they continue to run their lives in roughly the same way so there is a kind of natural progression from one generation or another? Will our ideas still be remembered, our general way of life honoured; will they even be interested in any of our old photographs or heirlooms?!

And we look at what happens in the world we see historical records trashed, political careers ridiculed, cities remodelled, familiar bits of our cultural and geographical landscape subject to the bulldozer. Someone was recalling this week the names of familiar high street shops that no longer exist. It was a very long list...

This is what I have discovered, says Ecclesiastes, is that life is painful and full of disappointment and grief. Each of us tries to make the best of what we have but then we must leave it to someone else who will not care. So I say to myself: life is unfair. None of it makes any sense.

One of the great delights of living in ‘the Old World’ – full of ancient buildings and institutions - is to have permanent reminders of how to tackle this desperately negative view of life. Standing in any of our great Cathedrals, guide book in hand, is to marvel at the faith and the confidence of past generations to build – sometimes over the course of centuries – these great temples of faith and trust in God. Foundations laid, plans change; walls raised, plans changed; roofs finally set in place only to discover that buttresses are needed because the weight was not properly calculated. Not one of our great churches has ended up as originally conceived. And yet they are all there as monuments to what happens when people stop being concerned for the realisation of their own personal visions – but have trusted in God to go on creating, organically, with the small contributions that we were able to make along the way. *Apollos planted, Paul watered, but God did the growing.*

Overall Ecclesiastes is massively depressing and empty. But it’s place in the Canon of the Bible is not to be underestimated because in showing us how limited material rewards are ever going to be in this life – the fact that no one is really very grateful for anything! – only emphasizes the need for a much deeper answer. We rarely get what we want in this life and we certainly can’t control what will happen after we are gone; but if we can see our part as humble contributions to what God is doing, then that pall of despair and hopelessness lifts. *In Christ will all be made alive – not whether you or I have had the final word on anything!*

Legacy is such a pernicious word! Will I be remembered; will my work endure? Get over it, my friend; the answer is almost certainly no! But look at any great Cathedral and see the thousands of careers that are represented in those amazing testimonies to the enduring work of God. It is his ability to use what we do that gives meaning to each of our lives. In the words of today’s Eucharistic Prayer Preface: *By the power of love and in obedience to your will Jesus bids us lay aside the treasure that we value so highly and the wealth that makes us feel secure so that we can exchange the water of existence for the new wine of life eternal...*