

Grumpy Old Man?

Eccles 1:12-18

Have you ever seen the programme Grumpy Old Men. It involves “words of wisdom” from older celebrities making cynical comments about life. It's supposed to make us laugh at the perversity of life and of the older – perhaps not so old - men giving their platitudes on life.

Last week we had a look at the beginning of Ecclesiastes and found these to be the words of a man nearing the end of his life. He's had it all, done it all and blown it all. And his only commentary on life was echoed also by the words we read tonight. Life was meaningless, meaningless – chasing after the wind.

A feature of the opening chapter is that God only gets his first mention in verse 13 and that's pretty fleeting and we only get more at the end of chapter 2. To me it comes across as a the words of a sad, disillusioned man. A grumpy old man.

The thing is, that these are not the words of someone with a chip on their shoulder. He was a rich, educated man, with a thirst for knowledge and both the time and wealth to be able to gain the very best learning the world had to offer. In fact the very name of this book reflects just who he was. :let's look in verse 12.

12 I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. 13 I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on men! 14 I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

"*I the Teacher was king over Israel in Jerusalem*". "The word from which 'Teacher' is translated is a Hebrew term, [~Qoheleth], pronounced 'Kohleth' or 'Kohlet.' Many attempts to translate this have given us: 'Ecclesiastes,' 'The Preacher,' 'The Speaker,' 'The President,' 'The Spokesman,' 'The Philosopher,'; and we might add, 'The Professor.'"

Traditionally theologians identify the Teacher as being one man – Solomon. He fits the MO well. Here was a man that had the opportunity with the wisdom that God had allowed him to have to study everything that could be studied. He was a learned man. But all that wisdom and all that learning led him to give this comment.

I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on men! 14 I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

He asked for wisdom, and he became an expert at lots of things. But never found a real meaning in life because there is so much to be known. I think that explains the phrase: *What a heavy burden God has laid on men!* If you want to be a person of learning, there is more knowledge than there there is the ability to make sense of the meaning of it.

All learning did was to confirm to him that things done under the sun are ultimately meaningless. That to me is no surprise. In a secular world, it's hard to philosophically answer the question: why me? All scientists will tell you is that you are a complex biological organism that has just kinda evolved. For most people that isn't enough. We are sentient: we have a sense of our own existence. How can that be? Surely there is a spiritual world out there. But on a human level, people just can't reach it. Here's what

one commentator says about verse 13: *To understand "all that is done under heaven" (1:13) is so far beyond human ability that it is foolishness to believe we can even make a dent in the vastness of what we don't know.*

Dwell on that and life is meaningless – it only means something as long as you are alive. And for people today who don't know God, and who see Him as distant and unobtainable, life is meaningless because they can't see what it's for. When things go wrong in life, they can't see purpose, meaning or if they do think there might be, they can't see how themselves or God may fit into it.

Actually, I could describe the Teacher's view in chapter 1 as a secular view – it is a view without God. It doesn't include God. In Ecclesiastes 1 God doesn't even get a mention until verse 13 and even then it's this comment: *What a heavy burden God has laid on men!* When like Solomon, we tread our own path, the danger is we will end up like Solomon. Rather than being Spirit chasers, to use a modern phrase, we become people that chase after the wind. And where does the wind go? Let's get a few more words from Solomon in verse 17

17 Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind.

No wonder he died a disillusioned man, with his great kingdom in tatters if all life was to him was chasing the wind; meaningless.

What a difference all this should be to us as the people of God! Solomon found out that as he compromised himself with women and idols, his relationship to God just withered and life became meaningless. It's a warning to us about allowing ourselves to become compromised by the world, because we will start to think like it.

In Christ, we have a different perspective on the world. We see it in the context of eternity. We see life in terms of heaven. So in *Luke 12:33 Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. 34 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.* (NRSV)

This is Jesus' antidote to the Teacher. If our hearts are set in heaven, then it affects our attitude to the world. How much of our lives are an investment in heaven. Solomon invested it on earth and look where he got.

Let's go down to verses 15-18:

15 What is twisted cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted. 16 I thought to myself, "Look, I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge." 17 Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind. 18 For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.

If our view of the world goes no further than the world, then however much we study anything, be it wisdom or folly; we get no further than Solomon.

Actually, in reality, most people don't think too hard about it. Ask anyone about the meaning

of life and see what you get. Usually they haven't really thought about it, particularly if they are young. They have an expectation of life. The potential for all that may happen is important. They are like Solomon when he was young. There was a world to see, a family to have, experiences to savour. They don't want to think about pain, or sickness, or death. But what happens when that all comes? I know of many people who are cast into despair because they can't see further than pain and disillusionment with life. The more knowledge the more grief.

Verse 15 is a comment on what the world is like without God. *15 What is twisted cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted.* Usually if something breaks, it can be fixed. But there's certain kinds of breakdown or damage that's beyond repair. With most modern electronic stuff, the possibility of repair is nil. It has to be thrown away. To Solomon, the damage was done and nothing could be done about the world. It's fallen finished. People are fallen, finished. But is that really true?

But that's not the message of a world in which God has transformed us into when we decided to follow Jesus. In Christ we find that twisted lives can be straightened, that what is lacking is made up, restored. It's such a message of hope! It's what Good News is all about. It isn't just about investing in eternity, but making meaning to life in the context of our future hope. That's why Ecclesiastes isn't a commentary on the spiritual life of God's people. It's a commentary on the life of a man who had it all with God, but fell away. It's a commentary on the secular, the godless.

So Christian hope? Let me finish with a verse: *9 I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.* John 10:9-10

2:1 I thought in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good." But that also proved to be meaningless. 2 "Laughter," I said, "is foolish. And what does pleasure accomplish?" 3 I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly--my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives. 4 I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. 5 I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. 6 I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. 7 I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. 8 I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired men and women singers, and a harem as well--the delights of the heart of man. 9 I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me.

10 I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labour. 11 Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.

12 Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom, and also madness and folly. What more can the king's successor do than what has already been done? 13 I saw that wisdom is better than folly, just as light is better than darkness. 14 The wise man has eyes in his head, while the fool walks in the darkness; but I came to realize that the same fate overtakes them both.

15 Then I thought in my heart, "The fate of the fool will overtake me also. What then do I gain by being wise?" I said in my heart, "This too is meaningless." 16 For the wise man, like the fool, will not be long remembered; in days to come both will be forgotten. Like the fool, the wise man too must die! 17 So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. 18 I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me.

19 And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless. 20 So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labour under the sun. 21 For a man may do his work with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune. 22 What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labours under the sun? 23 All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is meaningless.

24 A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, 25 for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? 26 To the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.