

Sermon for Trinity 10 (C)- St James' Cambridge – 4.8.13
The Revd Debbie Ford

Lectionary Readings: Ecclesiastes 1:2-23, 2:18-23

Psalm 49

Colossians 3:1-11

Luke 12:13-21

“So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God... for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” (Col 3:1, 3)

- About ten years ago, I was lucky enough to be invited to China. I was thrilled: absolutely dying to see and taste just a little of the country, people and ancient traditions I had read and heard so much about.
- Our first port of call was Hong Kong. Teeming with people and traffic, and the distinct whiff of cooking oil, tinged with soy sauce as we drove through the streets. Our hotel was built into a shopping centre, where on most levels, rather than exiting onto the street, you walked straight out into a multitude of shops.
- I've seen a lot of shopping centres over the years, but this one was of a different league. It felt like the whole of Hong Kong was one enormous shopping centre – a continuous network of buildings, woven together by bridges and walkways so that you were always part of it. And the shops never seemed to close: day and night. The pace of life was unbelievable... London or Paris or New York didn't have a patch on it.
- Much as I appreciated the hospitality of our hosts, I was disappointed: I had come to see *China* – not go shopping!
- I wanted to see and taste the culture, ancient heritage and landscapes...and to get a sense of the *spirit* of the place. But I soon realised I'd have to wait till Mainland China for that.
- And Beijing was much more interesting in this sense (although that was some years ago – and it, too, has changed massively since) and Shanghai was perhaps somewhere in between: still little glimpses

of ‘traditional’ China but amidst massive construction and transformation into one of the top centres for business and commerce in the world.

- Again, I was horrified by the consumerism and apparent lack of insight into what is cost in the West. I remember trying to talk about it with one academic. He had been exiled and sentenced to hard labour when he was a teenager during the Cultural Revolution. Now (just over twenty years later) he was an up and coming academic, yet seemed to be completely caught up in the values of materialism and success – whatever the cost. I said something like: “But don’t you see what consumerism has done to us in the West?” Only to be told sharply: “And who are *you* to tell me about poverty?”
- I found it both shocking and humbling. Perhaps he was right, who *was* I to say anything? And yet...
- It’s exactly the sort of thing our readings are about today: the Psalm entitled ‘The Folly of Trust in Riches’ and Jesus doesn’t mince his words in the gospel, either, does he?
“Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”
- Poignant in a week where the new head of the Royal Bank of Scotland has been applauded for not receiving bonus payments and deciding that he will somehow manage to live on a mere million pounds during his first year.
- The exact author of Ecclesiastes is unclear, but he names himself ‘The Teacher.’ The Hebrew is *Koheleth* (of which ‘Ecclesiastes’ is the Latin translation) – meaning ‘one who convenes an assembly’ – a bit like the Speaker in the House of Commons - and he’s probably addressing a group of up- and- coming young students/future leaders:
- “I... applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind...”

- And it's often (understandably!) interpreted very negatively: as if Koheleth is a voice of doom and gloom, putting a real downer on any aspirations his students might have had (perhaps a bit like the man in Shanghai heard me).
- Apparently a lot of the ambiguity and playfulness in the original language of the text is lost in translation. And when listened to in the book as a whole, the author seems to be speaking out of a wealth of experience of life (indeed he's often been thought to be King Solomon) – and speaks about the pain of insight and the limits of human understanding with an authority borne out of both hard earned experience and God-given wisdom.
- He's writing to try and expose some of the pretences that those of us here today are just as likely to get caught up in as his 3rd Century BC audience were: illusions of grandeur or escapism of different sorts - just as the Psalmist and Jesus are.
- But he's not a cynic, aiming to 'strip' us and leave us naked – like so much of today's culture of naming and shaming does.
- The word translated 'vanity' (when he keeps saying 'All is vanity...') here, is the Hebrew *hevel*: which means 'mist' or 'vapour' – particularly fitting for helping us to see through our illusions.
- What he wants us to glimpse is that there's something more precious to be discovered...
- 'Don't be tempted to think the grass is greener... Don't be tempted to think 'If I just had the right house, or job, or figure, or status, or salary, or partner...*then* I'd be happy.'
- It's the ultimate antidote to all that's advocated in the TV programme 'The Apprentice' (which, by the way, is one of my daughters' highlights of the week!)
- There's something even *more precious*.... Something that doesn't make sense in the world's eyes or to our human understanding or reason. Something we can only glimpse and discover as our spiritual sight is transformed and the 'inner eyes and ears of our hearts' are opened.

- Real wisdom transcends and takes us deeper into something even more real- more substantial: something that will last for ever.
- It's an invitation to receive the pleasures of life as pure gift and to recognise God as their source and giver. The word 'give' is used 28 times in the short little book of Ecclesiastes – and 15 of those times it's used in relation to God as giver: just a few verses after our passage, the author writes: “for apart from him, who can eat or who can have enjoyment....” We might have superficial enjoyment, but it won't last.... it will soon need another 'fix' or 'achievement' to top it up.
- In Hebrew, the word for 'sinner' means 'one who misses the target.' One who misses the point of the life God's given.
- That's what Jesus warns us: “Take care! Be on your guard...” Don't be fools. It *matters* what you spend your time and energy seeking. Don't get trapped in an absurd work culture...don't get trapped in materialism... don't let those things be where you get your sense of value.
- **“Seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God... for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.”**
- We find who we really are as we go deeper into God through Jesus Christ.
- So Paul urges us: 'Put to death whatever gets in the way or holds you back.' And he gives another list of the sorts of things we get caught up in – emphasising how easy it is for us to think we're superior to others and how tempting it is for us to lash out with our tongues when we feel hurt or misunderstood.
- He says 'orient all that is in you to God.... Let his Spirit come more and more alive in you... Don't waste a minute... Let him transform you.... Be one with him: **'rich towards the Father'**, who has given you everything.

“[for] you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.”

- Last weekend, whilst I was on duty at the hospital, I spent a long time with a man whose forty year old son was dying. He was full of guilt and regret.... He said to me “I’m afraid I’m not religious. I used to be: I used to go to church and Sunday School and all that. But I’m afraid I’ve given it all up. I simply don’t believe it any more. He paused for a minute, then continued: “I wish I could believe.... I really wish I could. I think it would bring me some comfort.”
- I didn’t say anything at the time (and when his son died and I checked, “I suppose you wouldn’t want me to say a prayer then, he said “Go on then...”), but it made me wonder....
- The writer of Ecclesiastes is someone who is well up on the various Greek philosophers/-ies of the time, including the materialist Epicurus, whose ideal was to achieve freedom from pain and anxiety through modesty and self control in pleasure– w (for some reason it reminds me of the Buddhist practice of ‘mindfulness’ that is so trendy at the moment).
- But Koheleth, with deeper insight, recognises that “anyone who is very wise has *many* reasons to be angry, as one who daily sees many things that are wrong.”¹

“Life in this world is not necessarily any easier for the faithful than those who have fallen away from God. Indeed, it may be more difficult, for faith requires that the faithful enter into [the most difficult] situations where evil [often] seems to have triumphed... they must make God’s presence known there.”²

- As we become one with Christ and are drawn deeper into the mystery of his love and of the hope of his death and resurrection: we are given strength to see, feel and bear *with* God the things that are superficial and wrong – so far from what he has created them to be: the Spirit in us groaning and crying out ‘with cries too deep for

¹ Martin Luther, quoted by Ellen Davis in *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs* (Westminster John Knox, 2000) p. 175

² Ibid.

words.’ Far from that ‘detaching’ from the world, we go *deeper* into it: that’s the movement of the incarnation and resurrection in us.

- And the mystery is, that as we do, we know we are going deeper into what is *real*: something that is both already and not yet – more precious than we could ever have imagined.
- As a teacher in a school in one of the Sowetan townships put it to my daughter: “Don’t feel sorry for *us*! We may be poor, but we’re *so* rich in so many of other ways. We have each other... our church... our faith... our family... and we have our *music*.”
- They know what it is to have discovered the pearl of great price – they have accepted God’s gift – and in so doing, have hearts and spirits that are *rich* towards God.
- So as we prepare to celebrate Communion together, let us open ourselves to receiving more and more of God’s life in us... Let us recognise and celebrate God’s goodness in our midst... and let us pray for the grace to be *rich* towards God.

Amen.

Ecclesiastes 1:2-23, 2:18-23

² Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity....

The Futility of Seeking Wisdom

12 I, the Teacher, when king over Israel in Jerusalem, ¹³applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. ¹⁴I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind...

18 I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me ¹⁹—and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. ²⁰So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labours under the sun, ²¹because sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. ²²What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun?²³For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity.

Psalm 49

The Folly of Trust in Riches

To the leader. Of the Korahites. A Psalm.

- ¹ Hear this, all you peoples;
give ear, all inhabitants of the world,
² both low and high,
rich and poor together.
³ My mouth shall speak wisdom;
the meditation of my heart shall be understanding.
⁴ I will incline my ear to a proverb;
I will solve my riddle to the music of the harp.

⁵ Why should I fear in times of trouble,
when the iniquity of my persecutors surrounds me,
⁶ those who trust in their wealth
and boast of the abundance of their riches?
⁷ Truly, no ransom avails for one's life,

there is no price one can give to God for it.
⁸ For the ransom of life is costly,
 and can never suffice,
⁹ that one should live on for ever
 and never see the grave.

¹⁰ When we look at the wise, they die;
 fool and dolt perish together
 and leave their wealth to others.
¹¹ Their graves are their homes for ever,
 their dwelling-places to all generations,
 though they named lands their own.
¹² Mortals cannot abide in their pomp;
 they are like the animals that perish.

Colossians 3:1-11

The New Life in Christ

³ So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, ³ for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.
⁵ Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). ⁶ On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. ⁷ These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. ⁸ But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. ⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. ¹¹ In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

Luke 12:13-21

The Parable of the Rich Fool

¹³ Someone in the crowd said to him, ‘Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.’ ¹⁴ But he said to him, ‘Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?’ ¹⁵ And he said to them, ‘Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.’ ¹⁶ Then he told them a parable: ‘The land of a rich man produced abundantly. ¹⁷ And he thought to himself,

“What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?”¹⁸ Then he said, “I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.”¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”²⁰ But God said to him, “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”²¹ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.’