

All is vanity?

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Perhaps the Old Testament and Gospel this morning are not the most soothing holiday reading? ‘The Teacher’ – the compiler of the book of Ecclesiastes – seems to be thoroughly unhappy with his work and everyone else’s. He just can’t see the point of what any of them are doing. The rich man in the Gospel story is not obviously wicked and, if we give him the benefit of the doubt, has probably worked hard to accumulate his wealth. But he discovers, when he finally decides to stop working and relax, that he’s left it too late. It is understandable if your reaction to both of these, and to the generally gloomy outlook of this morning’s psalm, is ‘Well – why bother?’ A sentiment encapsulated neatly by the fridge-magnet given to me many years ago which says: ‘If woman’s work is never done, why start?’

It’s an easy interpretation in all sorts of ways, especially if you put this alongside Jesus’s words elsewhere about God’s care and provision for those pesky lilies of the field which ‘toil not, neither do they spin’. We are to believe that God will make sure his people have the things they need. My in-laws certainly believed this. They were lovely people, very committed Quakers with a fierce determination to make a difference in the world. They embarked on several ambitious projects without ever knowing at the start where the necessary money and resources would come from, but firmly believing that God would provide. And when the projects were successfully completed they rejoiced in the fact that God had, indeed, provided. It was unfortunate, however, that they never really acknowledged the many people who, because they liked and respected Jo and Bernice and didn’t want to see them fail, contributed amazing amounts of money, time and effort. ‘God has no hands on earth but ours’, said Teresa of Avila, but the owners of those hands would still have appreciated a ‘thank-you’.

Another aspect of the ‘God will provide’ mentality is the ‘prosperity gospel’ preached by many fundamentalists and evangelical churches, predominantly in the US but not unknown here. The stronger your faith and the more robust your prayer-life, the more God will favour you with material rewards. As you become a better Christian you will also become richer and more successful in life. People who aren’t so well-off are clearly slacking in their religious observance, and if you experience a major set-back (like unemployment or bankruptcy) you are obviously being punished for serious sin. I’ll leave you to think through the other consequences of this, some of which we can see playing out today.

Both the Teacher in Ecclesiastes and Jesus in our Gospel are making a different point. Neither is condemning work or suggesting it is good to avoid it. In any society people have to provide for themselves and their families, and find ways of supporting each other and those who, for whatever reason, cannot provide for themselves. God gives us the skills, abilities and opportunities to do this, and expects us to put them to good use (think of the parable of the Talents). The problem arises when we place our hopes and our trust in our material possessions. ‘Money is the root of all evil’ is one of those quotes that gets piously trotted out as an awful warning. It is, of course, a sort of Biblical fake news. What St Paul actually wrote to Timothy was: ‘The love of money is the root of all evil.’ Money and possessions are not inherently wicked. It is what we do with them, and the importance we attach to them, that can – to quote Harold from last week – lead us into temptation.

We can all relate from our own experience to the Teacher's description of the 'toil and strain...days full of pain and work which is a vexation...even at night the mind does not rest'. We've all had responsibilities like that. And if this is all there is, and our minds and efforts are focused on getting on, getting a pay rise, getting promoted, moving to a better house, buying a bigger car, paying as little tax as possible and hoping our investments will continue to out-perform the stock market, this is, indeed, all vanity. The Teacher also bitterly regrets that others, who have not toiled as he has, will enjoy the fruits of his labours after he is dead. And the rich man in the Gospel is challenged by God: 'The things you have prepared, where will they be?'

We may end up being rich in material things, and maybe satisfied that we will be able to pass on a legacy to our children without being clobbered too much by death duties. But this is all meaningless unless we are, as the Gospel puts it, 'rich towards God'. That is the only thing that matters. How we do it should be the most important aspect of our lives. 'All things come from you, and of your own do we give you.' Beyond the immediate basic needs of ourselves and our families, we should be working out how to use our money and possessions to serve God and build his kingdom – and then doing it. In one sense those trendy declutterers have got the right idea, but with the wrong message. Not: 'Does this thing give me joy?' but 'Does this thing – or this skill – or this commitment – help me to serve God?' If it doesn't, don't throw it away. Pass it on to someone else who can use it better.

Something else is also important in building richness towards God: time. We willingly spend time enjoying ourselves, developing our skills and building relationships with our friends. We must also spend proper quality time building our relationship with God. It's all too easy to think that you haven't got time for prayer, Bible-reading, spiritual direction, or attending worship regularly. But once you start doing this, you will very quickly realise that you haven't got time not to do it. The busier you are, the more important it is to take time for God. It becomes an essential counterbalance to the rest of your life.

None of us know when or in what way our life will be demanded of us. We can't count on having time to prepare in the future. Each of us needs our own personally-tailored spiritual growth and investment plan, so that we can become rich with God. You know it makes sense.