

**Sunday 5/08/07**

**Preacher: Julia Denny-Dimitriou**

**Readings: Ecc 1:1 – 2: 11 ; Col 3: 1-11 ; Luke 12 13-21**

‘Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.’

Or, as the King James version has it, ‘Vanity of vanities. Vanity of vanities. All is vanity.’

These words could have been written by any number of philosophers down the ages who came to the same conclusion about the human condition. They could also be words from a song by a modern band, especially one of those loud, head-banging types.

A sure-fire way to deflate a teenager who’s playing unspeakable music by the latest group of nihilists is to tell him his music idol’s ideas are old news.

Precisely how old we are not sure. A common view is that the book of Ecclesiastes was written by King Solomon in about 935BCE. Some scholars hold to a later date, about 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BCE. The date is not our central concern, as the book’s theme is even older, as ancient as humanity itself. That is humankind’s search for meaning, which is my focus today.

The Hebrew title of the book means PREACHER or TEACHER. In this case, a teacher of wisdom. Eccles. is the Greek term for TEACHER.

The unknown Teacher has left us a work not only of ancient Near Eastern wisdom, but also of timeless truth and penetrating observation of humanity.

Now an old man, the writer records the lifetime he has spent searching for meaning. He has also watched others in their search and writes from this experience too.

He has come to the rather startling conclusion with which the book begins: ‘Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.’ It is significant that the word meaningless occurs 35 times in this book and only once elsewhere in the Bible.

In his search for meaning, Ecclesiastes went first to philosophy, to wisdom, devoting himself to study and becoming the wisest, most knowledgeable ruler

Jerusalem had ever had. Despite this achievement, his wistful conclusion is that pursuing wisdom 'is a chasing after the wind.'

Next, he tried to find meaning in pleasure, cheering himself with wine and indulging in frivolous pastimes. But that experiment was also a failure, and it earns just a few dismissive verses.

His next attempt was a more balanced, less indulgent style of living. He set out to be a man of culture. He built houses, planted gardens and parks, bought slaves, gathered huge flocks, and amassed great wealth. He acquired a harem and a troupe of singers to entertain him. Truly a man of great culture.

But this attempt to find meaning was no more successful than the previous two.

Chapter 2 of Ecc. Details the writer's efforts to find meaning through hard work, toiling long hours. However, he concludes bitterly that this too was meaningless AND a great misfortune because in the end, he will die and leave the fruits of his labour to someone else to enjoy and what, he asks is the point of that.

Ecc. could learn a thing or two from a lady I know. She has been on two overseas holidays this year and now she's planning a Mediterranean cruise. She certainly doesn't mean to leave anything to anyone – she seems to be doing her best to spend her children's inheritance and having a wonderful time of it too!

### **Others**

Having dealt with his own attempts to find meaning, Ecc. moves on to describe his observations of the quests of others.

The first area of search he deals with is position or status coupled with popularity. He recounts the rapid rise of a popular young ruler and his equally rapid fall from grace. He concludes, inevitably, that 'This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.'

Those who pursue wealth as a source of meaning are no more successful. From his observations Ecc. concludes that accumulating riches is nothing but a source of trouble and discontent. He writes: 'whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income.' Ecc. 5:10.

It may be a surprise, perhaps, that religion does not escape Ecc.'s critical observation. He has harsh words for religion that is secularised and humanised, from which God is excluded. He condemns religious practice that is all words and rituals and little or no worship from the heart. For this, and for those engaged in it, he has not only his customary conclusion, but also a warning:

‘Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore stand in awe of God.’ 5:7

Even though this anonymous Preacher and Teacher of wisdom wrote thousands of years ago, his words have a relevance to us that I am sure has not escaped you. The search for meaning IS as old as humanity itself, but it’s also as new as every individual who, in confusion and anguish, screams at the mute and hostile sky. It’s as new as every musician whose songs all say the same thing, even if the words are different:

‘Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.’

**Just as the search for meaning is ancient, so is the mistake of searching in the wrong place.**

For every example that Ecc. quotes, I have no doubt you can think of a contemporary equivalent.

Scientists and philosophers still dedicate their lives to pursuing knowledge and understanding: the source of the universe, the formula for creating human life, theories that try to explain the apparently inexplicable.

According to *Time* magazine, we have more free time now than ever in human history, which has created a huge and lucrative leisure industry. Life can be one long round of gluttony of the senses if you like: shopping, partying, beauty therapy, entertainment and then some.

The media feeds us a daily diet of stories about people who have searched and **still** search, in the wrong place for meaning in life: political power, authority, wealth, status, success, popularity, and career advancement. I am skeptical about *Time*’s claims about leisure time, because so many people seem to work 10, 12, 15 hours a day and more pursuing a career. I would not be surprised to see Ecc. now Angel Ecc. hovering at their shoulder whispering: ‘Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.’

Another of the Teacher’s criticisms that echoes loudly in our society is that of godless religion. This can occur in different ways: for example, religious busyness. Some people get so busy ‘doing God’s work’ that they no longer have time for God.

I have commented previously that as a liturgical church this is something we have to guard against – that our worship does not become all form and no content.

Ecc. hints at another area where people try to find meaning: in relationships. The empty nest syndrome, for example, is actually a crisis of meaning. I have heard it said that the new religion for parents of school-going children is education. Many parents, and dare I say it, especially mothers, pour themselves and their resources into their children. I commented recently to a mother at a birthday party that my children have a more active social life than I do. She replied that her children's social life **is** her social life. I would be so bold as to suggest that perhaps her children's **life** is her life.

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So where does that leave us? Terminally depressed and despairing of ever finding meaning in our lives? Not at all, because there is good news and then there is even better news.

### **Good news**

The good news is that Ecc. recognised, as we should, that all those areas of human experience and endeavour are good and wholesome, when in their right place. He calls them 'a blessing from God'.

When treated as a means to a greater end, all of them hard work, pleasure, authority, culture, philosophy and so on, are indeed good and godly. It is only when we make them into ends in themselves, when we try to make them the central purpose and meaning of life, that they become 'Meaningless! A chasing after the wind.'

Our greater end, Ecc. writes, is to live in worshipful relationship with God. He speaks from painful and regretful experience, having lived most of **his** life looking for meaning **without** God. He came to recognise only in his later years, that nothing can have meaningful purpose without God. That is the central theme of his writing:

'Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.'  
WITHOUT GOD.

With God, he tells us, things fall into some kind of order. We are able to come to some kind of understanding of the world and our place in it. You will note that I don't use any absolutes here, any more than the writer did.

Ecc. is neither naive nor dishonest enough to suggest that with God life is simple and easy. He recognises the limits of human understanding and our restricted ability to grasp the meaning of life. He advises that even **WITH** God, there will still be contradictions, unanswered questions, anomalies, experiences that are

difficult to understand. His advice is to accept the ambiguities of human experience for what they can be – frustrating, confusing and sometimes painful.

And yet, and yet, he says, ‘God has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men...’ 3: 11.

### **Even better news**

The even better news is that the need for meaning has been planted in our hearts by God. God created that need to be fulfilled by being in relationship with Godself. Augustine of Hippo described it thus: ‘You have made our hearts for yourself, Lord, and they are restless until they rest in you.’

This is indeed even better news: that God has created our deep hunger for meaning **and** given us the means to satisfy it.

God offers each of us an invitation, perhaps a challenge. Put me first in all those areas where you have vainly sought for meaning and they will settle into place. Not an immovable, unchanging order, mind, because the circumstances of our life change constantly. But, says God, you can find a dynamic, living equilibrium that suits me and you.

God’s invitation to each of us is ‘Let me give you meaning.’

How are we responding?

How will we respond?

In conclusion, Ecc. writes:

‘Remember your creator  
remember him before the silver cord of life  
is severed  
Or the golden bowl is broken;  
Before the dust returns to the ground it came from  
and the spirit returns to God who gave it.  
Remember your creator.’

**AMEN**