**18th November 2018**

**Ecclesiastes 12.8-14**

The title for this sermon is ‘In God’s hands: a future and a hope’: but I think even the almighty would have a job getting us to agree on a Brexit deal! I really feel sorry for Theresa May. Like Geoffrey Boycott she needs a stubborn firm jaw to take on all the criticisms, blows and calls for her resignation. You have to admire her grace and dignity in how she has handled herself. It must be tempting to say I resign – you sort it out! But resigning is the cowards option and a way of avoiding responsibility. She is a woman of duty. But at this moment in time it is very hard to predict what will happen for Britain’s future and our hope for a ‘successful’ leaving of the European Union. Managing people expectations and fantasies was always going to be impossible. Soft Brexit, hard Brexit, bad deal, no deal and some who still believe the only good deal is to stay in and have a second referendum to overturn what they see as a flawed decision two years ago.

We have been looking at the book of Ecclesiastes this month and reflecting on its themes. (Bible Class on Thursday 29th Nov). It is a brutally honest book about life and is basically a collection of proverbs or wise, sobering sayings.

In this last paragraph of the book the writer is commended for his wisdom and his sayings which are like goads, firmly embedded nails. Goads were like spurs. When horse riders dig their spurs into their horses, this isn’t a pleasant experience for the horses, but it’s an important experience... many of the writer of Ecclesiastes sayings make one say ‘ouch, I wish you hadn’t said that,’ but one knows that it was true and it was therefore something one needed to face rather than hide from, if one is to move forward in life.

To put it another way Ecclesiastes operates like a craftsman banging nails into a wall and making sure they are firmly fixed. Each time he bangs, we say ‘ouch’, but we know the banging is necessary if there is to be proper construction.

So, the conclusion affirms these painful sayings come from a shepherd – one who has a care for his flock: I’m saying these things to you because I love you! If you have to think about your future and lay plans – you need people around, you who will bring you reality. Who will ask honest questions – which may be painful- but the motivation is for our good.

The closing paragraph of Ecclesiastes begins by repeating the mantra with which the book began, whose key word it has repeated many times along the way: ‘Meaningless, meaningless. Everything is meaningless!’ The repetition of the phrase makes clear that Ecclesiastes isn’t a book that makes progress or comes to a conclusion about the meaning of life. It doesn’t find resolution for the problems and the questions it raises. Everything is as empty at the end as it was in the beginning. You came looking for answers – you went away with more questions!

I remember training for ministry and being alongside someone who was looking forward to finding out all the answers to all his questions about life, God the universe and everything. In the end he lost what little faith he had because he just got more questions and few sure answers.

Last week I said that Ecclesiastes believes that the sovereign God’s lordship lies behind all activities, but God hasn’t made it possible for humanity to make sense of them as aspects of some whole. Somewhat enigmatically Ecclesiastes declares that God has put eternity into our hearts. It suggests a yearning to understand the big picture about human life and about God’s activity in the world. The writer implies that there is such a big picture but from our position within the context of earthly life, ‘under the sun’, we can’t perceive what it is. All we see is the apparent random collection of contrasting activities and experiences that the book describes. We are left with many questions.

But the writer of Ecclesiastes doesn’t conclude that life is a waste of time and ends in despair, even suicide. Once more he urges people to settle for what we can have and do – enjoy our life, do what is good, eat and drink, enjoy the fruit of our labour and accept the gifts God has given us but also the limitations God has placed on us.

Faith means letting go of our desire to control the future and understand the past. We have to leave it in God’s hands.

I shared a saying by Corrie Ten Boom, a survivor of the Nazi concentration camps who said

*‘When a train goes through a tunnel and it gets dark, you don't throw away the ticket and jump off. You sit still and trust the engineer.’*

We know that God knows what the big picture is, and we are called to trust him for it.

Under the sun there’s no answers to the big questions about how the world works and what it means and what the future holds.

To find answers to those questions you have to look elsewhere. The answers lie in the account of what God has done in the whole of scripture and God’s involvement with Israel from the Exodus and leads up to the story of Jesus. The reason the Bible has authority is that it alone can tell us this story. The writer of the book of Ecclesiastes submits himself and us to a thought experiment. What happens when you leave out this story and confine yourself to what you can discover empirically? What you can see in history, in the world? ‘Everything is meaningless’ is the answer.

Possibly when he wrote this people were saying the exodus was a long time ago – did it happen – how do we know? How we can we be sure there is a point to life? That God is there and has a plan? On what basis do we live now? Ecclesiastes answer is to look to what we can see now and live in the light of those facts. He may be an encouragement to people in the twenty first century for whom the story of Jesus may seem a long time ago, and question whether it happened and the talk of his return also theoretical and remote.

The book’s last paragraph offers its own attempt to square the circle. Whilst the book of Ecclesiastes reminds you that without the revelation of God, without God speaking into our existence, our world is meaningless and without hope and without future, one Ecclesiastes is a good thing, it would be of no use for the Bible to be full of books like Ecclesiastes. The student’s favourite verse about the making of many books and the wearying nature of study (*Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body* v12) thus applies specifically to books that are stronger on questions than on answers. You can get lost in the fog of confusion and conflicting voices and opinions.

In the closing verse Ecclesiastes urges us not to lose track of the basics:

***13****Now all has been heard;
    here is the conclusion of the matter:
fear God and keep his commandments,
    for this is the duty of all mankind.****14****For God will bring every deed into judgment,
    including every hidden thing,
    whether it is good or evil.*

Fear God.

*The Hebrew word Yirah*means ‘fear’.[[1]](#endnote-1)

I had always found the phrase “fear of God” a strange one to comprehend. And I imagined there must be a different source word behind the fear of God as opposed to other types of fear – especially as the phrase “fear of God” is sometimes translated into English as “reverence” or “awe of God”. But this one-word *yirah*is used to speak of both the fear of God and the fear of other things, like enemies or death.

When we think of the future, we can be fearful. What will happen to us. Will we be alright. Will we cope. Any number of fears can rattle around in your head. You can try not to dwell on them, but that doesn’t actually make them go away. Increasingly in our society, issues of anxiety, depression and mental health are causing concern.

The question the Bible poses is whether our fear is rightly directed. We all have an innate drive to fear something. It is impossible to be truly fearless. The scriptures are very clear about who deserves all of our fear – all of our *yirah*: “**13***Fear the Lord your God, serve him only and take your oaths in his name.  (Deuteronomy 6:13, NIV).*

We should realize there are entities more powerful than us and there are circumstances outside of the realm of our control. God wants us to recognize our limitations and then direct our *yirah, our fear towards* him. After all, he is the most powerful one in the universe. So why should we fear anything above him or besides him?

Fear directed towards anything else grows like a weed and then festers like a sore. However, the fear of the Lord is a wellspring of life, goodness and wisdom to those who take hold of it. *“The yirah of the Lord leads to life, The fear of the Lord leads to life;
    then one rests content, untouched by trouble.* (Proverbs 19:23).

The wonderful news is that we are not stuck. We can ask God to help us uncover the lies behind any ungodly fears and to replace them with biblical truth. The central key to dealing with unhealthy fears is to choose to put all of our fear onto our trustworthy, faithful God. The Lord who is like a shepherd.

Now whenever a fear pops into my head, I try to enlist an effective strategy. I stop and say: “I choose to fear God instead of X. He alone is worthy of my fear” (Isaiah 8:13-14). Then I ask God to give me wisdom about any practical action I may need to take, and I move on with my day. Life with our *yirah, our fear,* rightly placed on the Lord is so liberating!

God is always our backstop: to return to Brexit language. There may be deals and plans for our lives. They may carry differing futures and fears and hopes. The bottom line that the writer of Ecclesiastes encourages us with is that whatever situation or crisis we find ourselves in ‘Fear God and keep his commands.’ Our future and our hope are ultimately in God’s hands. We can trust that our future and hope is therefore ultimately good because of Christ.

1. <https://www.premierchristianity.com/Past-Issues/2018/November-2018/5-Hebrew-words-every-Christian-should-know>

Bibliography: J. Goldingay, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs for Everyone, SPCK 2008 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)