**4th November 2018**

**Ecclesiastes 12.1-8, Luke 22.14-20**

The turn of November, the falling of the leaves from the trees, the onset of winter and the season of remembrance all lead to a focus on loss and grief and mortality.

In the church year 1st November is All Saints day, followed the next day by All souls – when the church traditionally remembers those who have died.

A recent survey suggests[[1]](#endnote-1) that a belief in the after life provides no greater protection against fear of death than a view of death as a final full stop.

It found that people who did not believe in God were actually more comfortable talking about their demise.

Humanists, atheists and those identified as ‘spiritual but not religious were most at ease when discussing death, with 75% declaring they had no problem in talking about it with their family. Hindus and Muslims scored lowest at 49% in the middle were Christians and agnostics at 66% who said they were happy to talk about their death. The survey was carried out by the Co op Funeral care and asked 30,000 people when they first thought about their own mortality and whether they felt comfortable in talking about their death.

Christians apparently contemplated their own mortality at the relatively late age of 30 compared with atheists who did so at 21. The researchers concluded that whether we identify as part of a religious group or not, death is something that is fearful for many people and is resulting in many not talking about it. David Collingwood the director of funerals at the Co op said a belief in the finality of death may alleviate fear. And he encouraged people to broach those conversations to avoid loved ones feeling the burden later down the line.

In his poem Aubade, Philip Larkin confronted the brutal inevitability of death:

*Courage is no good:*

*It means not scaring others. Being brave*

*Let’s no one off the grave.*

*Death is no different whined at than withstood.*

None of this research does not of itself demonstrate that a lack of faith creates calm resignation about death. It does however emphasise that existential angst is a universal theme. The euphemism we employ about dying: ‘rest in peace’, ‘passed away’ ‘eternal rest’ may acclimatize us to our mortality but does not make us less apprehensive of it.

In the modern age of pluralism and doubt there is no longer a shared civic language of death. Whereas families in the Victorian era would commonly congregate around a death bed to pay their last respects, far fewer people in today’s societies have even seen a dead body. How to grieve and mourn has few set rules these days.

Over the next few weeks our Bible readings are coming from the book of Ecclesiastes. It is one of the most honest and in some respects absurd of all the biblical books. It asks questions on what is the point of life? It is mostly negative and pessimistic. A great book for the Eeyore’s of life rather than the optimistic Tigger’s. A constant refrain through out the book is that life is meaningless, or as the King James Version puts it ‘all is vanity’. Best just to eat drink and enjoy what you have because tomorrow you die. But this philosopher’s reflections just want to make you ask the question ‘there simply has to be more to life than this?’

In chapter 12 having maybe convinced his readers that life is just absurd and a bit of a lottery, he says that actually he has found some meaning: it is in God and his judgement:

*You who are young, be happy while you are young,
    and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth.
Follow the ways of your heart
    and whatever your eyes see,
but know that for all these things
    God will bring you into judgment. 11.9*

Earlier in chapter three he had contemplated

*Everything is meaningless.****20****All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return.****21****Who knows if the human spirit rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?’* 3.20-21

Now he affirms that like the fate of Adam – we return to dust but….

*the dust returns to the ground it came from,
    and the spirit returns to God who gave it.* 12.7

The type of God the writer seems to believe in seems to be a distant authoritarian figure who is at best indifferent to his creation and at worst capricious to it. The great judge who may send joy or maybe suffering. It is a cold and heartless view of the universe – it’s all a lottery – it’s all meaningless.

We had a conversation at the Alpha Course last Monday on why people find faith and why young people especially and most people generally in our society are not interested in faith in God. Some felt they didn’t feel they had a need to be religious or desire faith in God. They were comfortable and enjoyed life – so why did they need God? Others thought that God was a bit of killjoy who may cramp your style and make your life boring or lacking in fun. The stereotype was of a grumpy legalistic neurotic Christian who has squeezed all the joy of life and grimly grits their teeth hoping for a pass into heaven when they die.

It’s all a long way from Jesus’ promise that those who follow him will have life in all its fullness.

Of course, Christian theology suggests that humanity is in a constant state of adolescent rebellion – refusing to acknowledge our creator, wanting to do our own thing – ‘no one tell us what to do - I want to live my own life’ and we play out a cosmic game of adolescent rebellion and independence. The technical theological word for this is sin – we want to displace God from being God of our lives and we prefer to be God of our own lives. Sin has ‘I’ in the middle. ‘I’ want to be the centre of my world.

Which makes it interesting the advice of the teacher in Ecclesiastes:

*Remember your Creator
    in the days of your youth,
before the days of trouble come
    and the years approach when you will say,
  ‘I find no pleasure in them’– 12.1*

He then gives a vivid poetic description of getting old. Many of the poetic images are ambiguous but the general picture is clear. Old age is when you stop enjoying life because your physical frailty makes it impossible to do so. It’s when gloom falls on your life. It’s when your arms fail, your legs grow weak, your teeth fall out, your eyes grow dim. It’s when your ears become deaf and your voice becomes faint. It’s when you wake up with the birds because you can’t sleep, but you can’t properly hear girls singing. It’s when you’re afraid of heights and of the danger of going out. It’s when your hair grows white like almond blossom and you shuffle along like a grasshopper and your desires fail. All these experiences indicate that you’re on your way to your eternal home in the grave; indeed, the mourners are already gathering like rival undertakers looking for business. It’s the moment when the thread of life snaps of like a bowl breaking. It’s when dirt and spirit return whence they came. [[2]](#endnote-2)

I told you Ecclesiastes is negative and pessimistic!

But we all know that people can decline physically but they are still sharp mentally. And the reverse: some people can be still physically fit yet ailing mentally. Is it scarier to contemplate physical decline or mental decline?

Either way the Bible calls us to care for one another and carry each other’s burdens which is the gift and cost of being part of a church.

So why the advice about remembering your Creator while you are young?

Perhaps the writer of Ecclesiastes is writing against the idea of deathbed repentance or deathbed regrets and resentments. Sort out what you need and how you should live well now, while you can before it’s too late?

But the dynamics of his concern are different. He doesn’t seem to be saying that deathbed repentance is impossible or that death may take you before you get around to repenting, but it seems more likely that he wants people to live authentic lives, and its such lives that need to be characterized by enjoyment of what god gives but truthfulness in respect of where our lives will lead.

I hear many times people telling me ‘oh don’t get old!’ I don’t think they are wishing me an early and sudden death – merely being realistic that old age can have its challenges.

These verses coupled with chapter 11 talks about living life with uncertainty and not being paralyzed by it. Maybe these verses comprise advice for adulthood rather than for youth or old age. Encouraging us to be prepared to take a chance. To enjoy the gifts of life while we have them, make the most of our opportunities, not in a self-obsessed kind of way but in a godly way – remembering that we are ultimately responsible to our creator for what we do with the gifts and blessing he gives us. But that there are laws of nature that God mostly works by and that we have to live with, even though we may not understand them at sometimes and like elsewhere in the Bible be honest enough to complain about the grimness and reality of it all.

But to remember our Creator while we are young suggests that we build up a store of positive remembrances.

When I sit down with families on the death of a family member and I ask them to remember that person – it is fascinating what they remember? Sometimes amusing stories that reflect the deceased personality. Sometimes their good deeds and work; sometimes it’s the things they don’t want to remember.

Remembrance is at the core of the Christian faith. In a moment we gather round the Lord’s table – do this in remembrance of me: it brings us to focus on what Jesus did for us who he was, what he stood for and therefore the values we should aspire to honour him and carry on his work. The Bible calls us to remember God and God’s nature as revealed to us through the scriptures: a God of liberation – who heard the cries of his people in slavery and brought them through the exodus to freedom; the God of grace who loves the unlovely, who offers us forgiveness for those who are repentant, who offers us hope when all hope is gone. Remembrance and faith join hands: we remember who our God is and that encourages us to have faith and trust that whatever we will go through,

whatever lies before us ,

whatever dark valley we find ourselves in,

whatever evil we have to face,

whatever enemies cross our path:

we will never be alone, we will never be separated from God’s love, we will be safe in God’s hands.

Maybe remembering your Creator in the days of your youth prepares you for those times when life is bad – that you don’t give in to the idea that it has never been good and can never be good again, but neither do you deny the present reality. Our hope is that God will bring judgement – judgement can be positive as well as negative, it can be vindication as much as condemnation – but for the Christian there is no condemnation in Christ Jesus. Hallelujah! God remembers – but also God forgets: forgets our trespasses because of Jesus doesn’t hold them against us! Hallelujah!

So as the writer of Ecclesiastes has written in the verse prior to encouraging the reader to remember their creator in the days of their youth he encourages them to be happy while you are young and banish anxiety from your heart. In other words, the judgement is about whether you have made the most of enjoying your life instead of being paralysed by fear of what may happen to you in old age.

Remember God. Remember the God who loves you. Remember the God who cares for you. Remember the God who in Jesus came to die for you and rise again so you could be with him. Remember all this especially in the hard times and the struggles and the darkness.

Remember that underneath are the everlasting arms that will carry us home even when our mortal strength is gone.

*‘The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord’* says the book of Job (1.21). In the giving and the taking we are still the Lord’s. St Paul writes in Romans:

*If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.* Roms 14.8

Remember that.

1. Times, Wednesday 31st Oct 2018 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. John Goldingay, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs for Everyone,* SPCK, 2014 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)