

Sermon, Proper 13C

Ecclesiastes 1:12-14; 2:18-23, Colossians 3:12-17 & Luke 12:13-21
Preached Sunday, August 5, 2007 at St. Philip's by RDF

"Vanity of vanities. All is vanity."

Most of us know these words. Even people who don't know that they come from the Bible have heard them. They are some of the most famous words of wisdom ever uttered. Although we did not hear exactly these words in our first reading, they come from the same place: the Book of Ecclesiastes in the Hebrew scriptures.

When various books were being considered for the canon of the Old Testament, Ecclesiastes was one of last books to be admitted. You don't have to hear much of it to understand why. It sounds pessimistic and even despairing in its tone. It is fearlessly honest. Ecclesiastes tells us that the nature of mortal life is brief, uncertain, has no lasting legacy, and always ends in death. The narrator of the book — called "the Teacher" — conducts an in-depth survey of everything in this life that can be learned or experienced. Afterwards, he concludes: "I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind" (1:14). He declares that true wisdom begins when we face up to this — that there is something futile and tragic about life on this side of heaven.

I say: Thank God the Book of Ecclesiastes made it into the Bible! Along with Proverbs, Job and a few books in the Apocrypha, they preserve timeless truths that many of us would rather not hear. In fact, this is one of the marks of true wisdom — something that we need to hear, but — most of the time — would prefer to avoid. Wisdom often offends our everyday sensibilities and clashes with popular opinion. I don't know about you, but I'd rather not have my toes stepped on if I can avoid it!

Nevertheless, we live in an era that is desperate for wisdom. There has never been a time in human history when so many people have had access to so much information — and yet there is so little wisdom to be found. The great poet T.S. Eliot asked the question this way:

"Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

"Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?" (from "the Rock")

In the Centering Prayer groups here at St. Philip's, members take turns leading the devotion at the beginning of each session. Last week, in one of the groups, a member quoted a contemporary poem which, for me, describes one of the deepest yearnings of our age:

This is not the age of information.

This is not the age of information.

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This is the time
of loaves
and fishes.
People are hungry.
And one good word is bread
for a thousand.*

So how do we find that “one good word” of wisdom for which we are so hungry? Where do we go to seek it? Some of the better-known quips and quotes on the subject can help us at the start of our search. Here are a few that I enjoyed:

“Wisdom is the reward you get for a lifetime of listening — when you would have preferred to talk” (Doug Larson).

“Experience comes from what we have done. Wisdom comes from what we have done badly” (Theodore Levitt, Harvard Business School).

“A wise man learns from the experience of others. An ordinary man learns from his own experience. A fool learns from nobody’s experience” (source unknown).

The authors of these quotes all seem to agree that experience can lead to wisdom. This is the very method used by the Teacher in Ecclesiastes. Towards the end of our first reading from that book, the Teacher says, “What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest” (2:22-23). The Teacher says that he “turned and gave [his] heart up to despair” because his labors all seemed to be in vain. This is why, to him, so much of life feels like vanity and “a chasing after wind.” Wisdom helped him face up to the difficult knowledge that the mortal life we share is often futile and tragic.

We need to know this stark truth because it gives us the wisdom of perspective: knowing what’s truly important and what’s not. In today’s Gospel reading from Luke, Jesus is asked a question by someone who does not have much perspective. “Teacher,” he says, “tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me” (12:13). Jesus refuses, of course, to get sucked into a family dispute over money. Instead, he tells a parable that offers a better perspective. By definition, the man in the parable who builds himself bigger barns for his many possessions has missed something essential. Because, as Jesus says, life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. And we have no guarantees about how long we have to live. So the faithful person will be rich towards God instead of storing up treasures he can’t take with him. This may not be something we are glad to hear, but it is life-giving wisdom — especially in this day and age.

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Let's ask the question once more: Where do we go to seek wisdom? Ultimately, after searching everywhere else, we go to God. Many verses in the Psalms and Proverbs tell us that "the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom." It's worth noting that the word "fear" used in this sense does not mean the emotion of being scared. Rather, it means a sense of reverence and awe before God. When we open ourselves to the mystery and wonder of God, we are setting ourselves on the path to wisdom. Along the way, we might discover the value of humility. The Book of Proverbs says that wisdom is "with the humble." This is the posture that St. Paul seems to recommend in our second reading today when he says that we should "clothe" ourselves with "compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another," he says, "and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other... Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony" (3:12-14). Wise words, indeed.

Of course, the best source of all for wisdom is the One who came to show us wisdom in human flesh. In another of his letters, Paul tells us that Jesus is "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:24). But, he goes on to say, the wisdom of God seems like foolishness to the world because it appears as weakness. Since Jesus died on the cross, the world cannot understand that God's power is at its strongest in that very weakness.

This may be the most profound and paradoxical wisdom that God shows us in Jesus: that suffering can actually lead to wisdom; that death leads to new life. This wisdom comes from the transformation that happens when we turn to God in the midst of great personal trials and hardships. Gerald May is a physician, psychiatrist, and Christian author. In his book The Dark Night of the Soul, he writes of the transformation that comes through suffering, grief and loss. He says that one of the fruits of this transformation is hope. Not hope for something: "just hope," he says, "a bare energy of open expectancy."

May goes on to offer a real-life illustration. In 1994, he went on a pilgrimage to Bosnia. This was during the third year of the terrible Bosnian war in which so many were killed, injured, or made homeless. During his trip, he met with some of the people in Bosnia "who had lost everything: homes, possessions, entire families."

"As they told their stories through tears of grief, I sensed deep hope in them. Through interpreters I asked if it were true.

'Yes, hope,' they smiled.

I asked if it was hope for peace.

'No, things have gone too far for that.'

I asked if they hoped the United Nations or the United States would intervene in some positive way.

'No, it's too late for that.'

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I asked them, 'Then, what is it you are hoping for?'

They were silent. They could not think of a thing to hope for, yet there it was — undeniable hope shining in them.

I asked one last question. 'How can you hope, when there's nothing to hope for?'

The answer was ... the Serbo-Croatian word for God.**

My friends, this is the one good word of wisdom ... that can feed us and a hungry world.

*"Loaves & Fishes" by David Whyte (supplied courtesy of CP group member Mary Marinucci).

**San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004, p. 193.