

Sunday 28th August 2022

Glynde Lutheran Church

Sermon on Ecclesiastes 1:1 – 2:26

Theme: "You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless till it rests in you" (Augustine)

Introduction:

Our focus this morning is on the book of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament. I guess that we don't get many sermons on this book, so I thought that this morning we'd look a close look at what the writer of this OT book is saying to us, *and what God is saying to us through this book.*

Part 1: "Our heart is restless..."

The writer of Ecclesiastes makes the point again and again that nothing in life gives us peace of mind: not pleasure, not material wealth, not wisdom, not anything. Nothing that this world offers can give us the peace of mind that we crave for.

Let me read to you some of the things that he says in the first couple of chapters of his book. By the way, it has long been thought that the writer of this book is King Solomon, David's son, the king who prayed for the gift of wisdom from God and received it (*1 Kings 3:1-15*).

Indeed, the person who added some opening words to this book thought just this. He placed at the beginning of the book the sentence: **These are the words of the Philosopher, David's Son, who was king in Jerusalem" (1:1).**

But I tend to agree with Derek Kidner in his *The Bible Speaks Today* commentary on Ecclesiastes when he says that:

For the purpose of this book, the writer imagines himself to be a second Solomon, so that in our imagination we can do the same" (p.28).

The writer wants us to place ourselves in Solomon's shoes and realise that even if we were him with all the wisdom, power, possessions, and women that he had, we would not even then have peace of mind.

Let me read to you a little bit from chapters one and two of Ecclesiastes:

I, the Philosopher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem.... ¹⁴I have seen everything done in this world, and I tell you, it is all useless. It is like chasing the wind....

¹⁶I told myself, "I have become a great man, far wiser than anyone who ruled Jerusalem before me. I know what wisdom and knowledge really are."

¹⁷I was determined to learn the difference between knowledge and foolishness, wisdom and madness. But I found out that I might as well be chasing the wind. ¹⁸The wiser you are, the more worries you have; the more you know, the more it hurts.

And he goes on and says in chapter two:

I decided to enjoy myself and find out what happiness is. But I found that this is useless, too. ²I discovered that laughter is foolish, that pleasure does you no good....

⁴I accomplished great things. I built myself houses and planted vineyards. ⁵I planted gardens and orchards, with all kinds of fruit trees in them; ⁶I dug ponds to irrigate them. ⁷I bought many slaves, and there were slaves born in my household. I owned more livestock than anyone else who had ever lived in Jerusalem. ⁸I also piled up silver and gold from the royal treasuries of the lands I ruled. Men and women sang to entertain me, and I had all the women a man could want.

⁹Yes, I was great, greater than anyone else who had ever lived in Jerusalem, and my wisdom never failed me. ¹⁰Anything I wanted, I got. I did not deny myself any pleasure. I was proud of everything I had worked for, and all this was my reward. ¹¹Then I thought about all that I had done and how hard I had worked doing it, and I realized that it didn't mean a thing. It was like chasing the wind—of no use at all.

And he continues:

So I started thinking about what it meant to be wise or reckless or foolish. ¹³Oh, I know, "Wisdom is better than foolishness, just as light is better than darkness. ¹⁴The wise can see where they are going,

and fools cannot.” But I also know that the same fate is waiting for us all.

¹⁵ I thought to myself, “What happens to fools is going to happen to me, too. So what have I gained from being so wise?” “Nothing,” I answered, “not a thing.” ¹⁶ No one remembers the wise, and no one remembers fools. In days to come, we will all be forgotten. We must all die—wise and foolish alike. ¹⁷ So life came to mean nothing to me, because everything in it had brought me nothing but trouble. It had all been useless; I had been chasing the wind.

The writer is saying in effect: “There is no peace of mind or inner contentment or inner happiness through anything in this world: not pleasure, not material wealth, not wisdom, not anything”

And the writer of Ecclesiastes has not been the only one to realise this, not by any stretch of the imagination. There are many people even today, *people who have bothered to think about life*, who have come to the same conclusion. They have come to realise, like the writer of Ecclesiastes, that life on its own is utterly futile and that nothing in life gives peace of mind.

Let me share with you some of the statements on life and its futility that I have found in my reading and researching over the years.

I guess that my starting point in thinking about all this was the writings of John Smith, *the Australian bokie evangelist*: his autobiography, *On the Side of the Angels*, and his book on the Australian situation entitled *Advance Australia Where?* John Smith has made a life-long study of collecting statements on life from philosophers and historians, from songs, films, cartoons, and even graffiti, *for even graffiti written on walls can reflect what people think and feel about life.*

Well, let me share with you some of the contemporary statements about life that John Smith has drawn my attention to or which I have found in other places.

1. Philosophers and Historians

* Victor Frankl

“For too long we have been dreaming a dream from which we are now waking up: the dream that if we just improve the socioeconomic situation of people, everything will be okay. The truth is that as the

struggle for survival has subsided, the question has emerged - survival for what?" (*In Search of Meaning textbook, 10*).

- * Jean-Paul Satre

"Life is a plastic bubble floating in a sea of meaninglessness" (*Ibid., 5*).

- * Manning Clark

Professor Manning Clark, the renounced Australian historian, calls Australians in general the "bored survivors of the Kingdom of Nothingness" (*Smith, Advance Australia Where?, 58*).

2. Songs

- * Joan Baez

"You are orphans in an age of no tomorrows"

- * Kansas (rock group)

"All we are is dust in the wind"

- * Pink Floyd (rock group)

All we are is "just another brick in the wall"

3. Films

- * Monty Python group

The final song in "Life of Brian" states that "Life is a bunch of shit, when you look at it" (*but don't quote this in sermon!*).

- * Woody Allen (*maker of such films as "Annie Hall", "Manhattan", "Hannah and her sisters"*). In a well quoted interview with the magazine Esquire, he states that humankind is left with:

"...alienation, loneliness and emptiness verging on madness... The fundamental thing behind all motivation and all activity is the constant struggle against annihilation and against death. It's absolutely stupefying in its terror, and it renders anyone's accomplishments meaningless" (*Smith, 46*).

4. The rich and the famous

- * "Celebrities speak out on Fame and Materialism" website:

- * Eric Clapton

- * John Lennon

- * Russel Brand (*See Appendix 2*)

5. Cartoons

- * Leunig (cartoons from p.6 of *In Search of Meaning Workbook* on overhead, plus other cartoons).
- * Charles Schulz's cartoon, "Peanuts"
(See Addendum 1)

These people, like the writer of Ecclesiastes, have come to the conclusion that nothing in life gives meaning for life, or peace of mind: not pleasure, not material wealth, not wisdom, not anything.

Part 2: “..till it rests in you”

Peace of mind, and meaning for life, comes only when we are “in Christ”, as Paul puts it in the NT. When we are united to Jesus through our baptism and our faith, *our trust in him as our Saviour*, then we have God's forgiveness, peace of mind, we know what life is all about, and we have the assurance of eternal life with Jesus in God's new Kingdom when we die.

Let me read to you a few passages from the NT where these things are stated:

* *God's forgiveness*

²¹ But now God's way of putting people right with himself has been revealed. It has nothing to do with law, even though the Law of Moses and the prophets gave their witness to it. ²² God puts people right through their faith in Jesus Christ. God does this to all who believe in Christ, because there is no difference at all: ²³ everyone has sinned and is far away from God's saving presence. ²⁴ But by the free gift of God's grace all are put right with him through Christ Jesus, who sets them free. ²⁵⁻²⁶ God offered him, so that by his blood he should become the means by which people's sins are forgiven through their faith in him....

²⁸ For we conclude that a person is put right with God only through faith, and not by doing what the Law commands (Rom. 3:21-28)

* *Peace of mind*

Now that we have been put right with God through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:1)

There is no condemnation now for those who live in union with Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1)

* *A purpose for life*

14 I, your Lord and Teacher, have just washed your feet. You, then, should wash one another's feet. **15** I have set an example for you, so that you will do just what I have done for you....

34 And now I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. **35** If you have love for one another, then everyone will know that you are my disciples (*John 13:14-15, 34*).

Jesus replied, "You go, then, and do the same." (*Luke 10:37*)

8-9 For it is by God's grace that you have been saved through faith. It is not the result of your own efforts, but God's gift, so that no one can boast about it. **10** God has made us what we are, and in our union with Christ Jesus he has created us for a life of good deeds, which he has already prepared for us to do (*Eph. 2:8-10, plus TTD slide 18E "Become who you are"*).

* *A certain hope*

"Do not be worried and upset," Jesus told them. "Believe in God and believe also in me. **2** There are many rooms in my Father's house, and I am going to prepare a place for you. I would not tell you this if it were not so. **3** And after I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to myself, so that you will be where I am.

4 You know the way that leads to the place where I am going." **5** Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going; so how can we know the way to get there?"

6 Jesus answered him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one goes to the Father except by me" (*John 14:1-3, 6*)

13 Our friends, we want you to know the truth about those who have died, so that you will not be sad, as are those who have no hope. **14** We believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will take back with Jesus those who have died believing in him (*1 Thess 4:13-14*)

20 But the truth is that Christ has been raised from death, as the guarantee that those who sleep in death will also be raised (*1 Cor. 15:20*).

Forgiveness, peace of mind, knowing the purpose that God has for you in your life, and having the certainty that we will live with Jesus after we die comes when we are "in Christ", that is on the boat that is Jesus (*cf. 1 Peter 3*).

Conclusion:

Let's finish up. Centuries ago in the 4th-5th century A.D., a man by the name of Augustine penned some words that have been quoted and requoted down through the ages.

He wrote:

God, 'You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless till it rests in you'.

If we live in this world without God, our heart is indeed restless. As the writer of Ecclesiastes realised, and as countless other people have realised, nothing in this life brings peace of mind: not pleasure, not material wealth, not wisdom, not anything.

As many of us have found out for ourselves: peace of mind comes only when we are "in Christ", when we are united with Jesus through our baptism and our faith in him as our Saviour.

Let's pray.

"Dear God, dear Father,

Thank you for sending your Son Jesus to suffer the punishment that we deserve for the wrongs that we have done and will do, and thank you for uniting us to him through our baptism and for giving us the gift of faith by which we remain united to him.

Thank you for the peace of mind and the sense of meaning for life that you have given us.

Father, we pray for those who wander aimlessly in what they perceive to be "a sea of meaninglessness". Lead them to you through Jesus so that they might have rest for their inner being and peace of mind.

In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen."

Addenda:

1) Excerpt re “vanity”/“futility”, *Hebel in Hebrew*

**“Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher
Vanity of vanities! All is vanity (1:2).**

A wisp of vapour, a puff of wind, a mere breath—nothing that you can put your hands on; the nearest thing to zero....

In terms that we would use to day, the summing up could be:

“Utter futility..., utter futility!

The whole thing is futile” (*Kidner, Ecclesiastes, p 22*)

2) Internet site

I looked up a site on the internet entitled: *Celebrities speak out on Fame and Materialism*. Listen to some of the things they say....

* Russel Brand

I thought that it would be good to be rich and famous. I’ve been inside now, and I’ve seen the other side of the Looking Glass. It ain’t...worth it. It doesn’t feed your soul. You still feel empty inside.

* Eric Clapton

I had everything a man could want. I was a millionaire, I had beautiful women in my life, I had cars, a solid gold career, and a future.... And yet on a daily basis, I wanted to commit suicide.

* John Lennon

As a Beetle, we had made it, and there was nothing to do. We had money and fame, and there was no joy.