

The Book of Ecclesiastes – 2 December by Helen Poole

Advent is such a lovely time; a time of joyful expectation of course, but as well as that, a time to prepare ourselves for the great mystery of love reaching out to us at Christmas in such an amazing, humbling and astonishing way.

Traditionally it was a time, rather like Lent, set apart by the Church to prepare the way; but it was also an important and solemn time to think about the four last things: Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell and where we stand in our relationship with God..

So this year, if we do choose to use these four weeks of Advent to re-assess our values and perhaps re-order our lives, it might be a good time to read the book of Ecclesiastes, one of the great Wisdom books exploring the meaning of life, the universe and everything.

But first a word of warning: it's probably not the book to read when you're feeling rather low because, as one commentator has put it, it certainly starts off on a low note...and then it gets worse:

Vanity of vanities, said the Preacher, vanity of vanities, all is vanity.

And that refrain and sense of futility is, I'm afraid, echoed all through the book.

But the strange thing is, that in spite of its negativity, and its setting in such a very different ancient patriarchal culture, it is apparently one of the most popular books in the bible; and one good reason for that is because so many of its sayings are still in current usage and so many of its readings still chosen for life changing events.

Chapter 3 vv 1-8: *There is a time for everything, a time to be born and a time to die*, is a much loved and strangely comforting reading for funerals and I've often been surprised by the number of people who choose it.

For weddings chapter 4 vv 9-12 has been popular for obvious reasons, and for those wanting to put God at the centre of their marriage, the last verse is especially important: *Two are better than one. If two lie down together they will keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? A cord of three strands is not easily broken.*

And the number of people who can still recite Chapter 12 vv 1-7: *Remember your creator in the days of your youth* many years after their last end of term service is quite remarkable.

But perhaps the main reason for keeping its place as one of the most popular books is because it still has so much to say to a materialistic, consumer driven modern world.

The mysterious Preacher, and no-one really knows who he is (but all too clearly he is a man and some of his, to our ears, outrageous statements do have to be put into the context of his culture) has had a full and eventful life. He knows what it's like to be hugely successful both personally and financially and he knows what it's like to lose everything too.. and he discovers that after a while his riches give him no pleasure at all, so what on earth is the point is of so much striving?

You can spend your whole life working and what do you have to show for it?
You can try to find happiness and meaning in laughter and enjoyment riches and success, even wisdom and religion, but in the end they will all fail and in the end death makes them all meaningless. *All are of the dust, and all turn to dust again.*

Even God seems unjust and unpredictable, because whether you're good or bad, you just never know what luck you are going to have in this random world.

In the end, for all of us, everything and everyone passes away and possession is an illusion. We can go on acquiring and building bigger and bigger barns to store our treasure, but that will all end one day too.

So yes, everything does pass away. It's no good ignoring the dark side of life and hoping it will just go away because it won't, and we have to face up to our mortality.

The true meaning of life, the preacher discovers, is to be found in making the very most of all the days that God gives us, however many or few they may be, to live in the present moment, to fear God and keep his commandments, to eat, drink and be merry with the wonderful gifts around us while we have them and then to let God be the judge

In the end everything is pure gift and grace from God, and once we see that, at last we can begin to let go of the things that don't really matter.

So perhaps, if this book helps us to find a better way of life, it turns out to be not so depressing after all, just honest and realistic and wise too. The preacher's words are not meant to drag us down and make us feel hopeless, but to help us find hope and meaning in the places and in the things that really matter.

Apparently the book of Ecclesiastes only just squeezed into the Hebrew Scriptures because of a supposed attribution to Solomon, but at its heart it still voices one of the most basic and one of the wisest of Jewish sayings: My son, my daughter, enjoy!

That seems to be not a bad preparation for the most beautiful Feast Day and the most wonderful Gift in the world waiting for us at the end of Advent.