

26/06/2022

THE JOY AND PRIVILEGE OF SERVICE Installation of Precentor
Pentecost 3, Year C – Evensong
Ecclesiastes 3:9-22
Luke 9:1-11

Before I begin, please may I welcome those who are here this evening for the Installation of our new Precentor, the Reverend Steve Hilton. I want to welcome particularly, Steve's family and friends, especially Marco, who have joined us here in the Cathedral; and I want to welcome those who are viewing this service online, and in particular, the Manchester Cathedral community who have been much in my prayers. I wish to thank the Dean of Manchester, the Very Reverend Rogers Govender MBE, and all his staff and congregation, who supported Steve as he began his ordained ministry and were gracious in supporting his response to the Holy Spirit's call to come to Perth. It has been a long journey (both in time and distance), for Steve to arrive and begin here at St George's. So we have waited eagerly (I know I have) for him to start, and I know Steve's been eager to begin. The great irony is that after months and months talking on zoom, the day after he started at the Cathedral I lost my voice. We were back to speaking with one another on zoom, me using sign language and text, and he looking very frustrated!

Steve, like Mary Poppins, arrived in Perth bringing the rain with him—much needed rain! He has been braving well the harsh and cold weather we're having here in Perth! (it is 24 degrees and sunny!)

Harold Kushner, in his delightful book *When all you've ever wanted isn't enough*, says that when he read the book of Ecclesiastes as a seventeen-year-old, he loved it at first sight. He remembers how much he loved how the author "attacks the orthodoxies of his time, pointing out the hypocrisy and exposing the shallowness of so much that passed for piety and wisdom in his day...I thought that Ecclesiastes was like me, an idealistic young enemy of falsehood and foolishness,

a challenger of pomp and pretence.”¹ But later in life, Kushner realised how badly he had understood the author, because the author was not an adolescent, but an older man, “a bitter, weary man past the mid-point of his life.” He says, “I completely missed the terror which, when I go back to read it now, is so obvious to me. This is a book by a very frightened man.”² This book is the story of the author’s life, a person confronted with the difficult truth that everything that matters, in the face of death, in the end, doesn’t matter at all. Nothing will remain of his life, his efforts, his successes or his failures, so what is the point of life? What makes life meaningful?

In the chapter before tonight’s passage, the author writes:

Then I said to myself, ‘What happens to the fool will happen to me also; why then have I been so very wise?’ And I said to myself that this also is vanity. For there is no enduring remembrance of the wise or of fools, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How can the wise die just like fools?³

So it is with a cynical voice that the author asks in our reading tonight, “What gain have the workers from their toil?” The implied answer is, ‘nothing.’ Immediately before this question are the words of that famous poem which begins, “For everything there is a season, a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die...”⁴ This introduces the author’s attempt to chronicle events of his life, not just to ask the question, “What does life mean?” but to ask it in more personal terms, “What does *my* life mean?” So when the author writes, “[God] has made everything suitable for its time; moreover, he has put a sense of past and future into [our] minds...” he is not saying how wonderful this is, but how futile our lives are... “they cannot find out what God has done

¹ Harold S. Kushner, *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough* (Pan, 1987), p. 37.

² *Ibid.*

³ Ecclesiastes 2:15-16

⁴ Ecclesiastes 3:1-2

from the beginning to the end.” ‘Eat, drink and be merry because tomorrow we die’, pretty well sums up his attitude.

I suppose that at the beginning of any ordained ministers’ appointment, and indeed, anyone starting a new position in the Church or even in secular employment, will ask themselves questions like: “Will I be any good? Is this the right place for me? Will they like me? Will I make a complete mess of things? Will I fit in? Will I make a difference?” Listening to the author of Ecclesiastes we might not get a pretty negative answer to those questions:

All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knows whether the human spirit goes upwards and the spirit of animals goes downwards to the earth? So I saw that there is nothing better than that all should enjoy their work, for that is their lot; who can bring them to see what will be after them?⁵

What will be after them is death! In other words, if they look back when it is all over, they will be persuaded that it is all pointless!

But ultimately Ecclesiastes understands that this failure to see how life can be meaningful, is really a failure of seeing, seeing ourselves by human standards. We value each other for our usefulness, but God values us for more than that. God give us hope in a way that no human can, by placing value on even the smallest gesture of generosity, kindness and forgiveness. Rabbi Kushner knew this for himself, when he says

God redeems us from the sense of failure and the fear of failure because he sees us as no human eyes can see us. Some religions teach that God sees us so clearly that he knows all our shameful thoughts and nasty secrets. I prefer to believe that God sees us so clearly that he knows better than anyone else our wounds and sorrows, the cares on our hearts from having wanted to do more and do better and being told by the world the we never would.⁶

⁵ Ecclesiastes 3:20-22

⁶ Kushner, *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough*, p. 188-9.

I think there is something similar in our second reading tonight, where Jesus tries to teach his disciples not to focus on the things we normally think will make us happy and secure, because, just as the author of Ecclesiastes found out, how much difference your life makes is not something that ultimately matters. “What matters is that we learn how to share our lives with others, making them and their world different, rather than trying to hoard life for ourselves.”⁷ And as Luke tells the story, the disciples are sent on their tasks with no honour, no status, no wealth or not even the security of food. And Luke tells this story right next to the story of Herod, sitting in his palace, with wealth and honour, power and status, all around him. It is Luke’s clever way of asking us, who is the most secure? Herod?—wondering if John was still in the grave where he had put him? Or the disciples?—full of hope and purpose? Herod “was perplexed, because it was said by some that John had been raised from the dead.” If your enemies rise from the dead, you won’t hold the crown for much longer! Herod lives his life constantly worried about who will knock him off his throne next. So in this not so subtle way, Luke invites us to follow the one who ‘has nowhere to lay his head.’ No place to call home. In this we find our meaning.

Steve, it is my hope for you and my prayer, that like Ecclesiastes, like the disciples whom Jesus sent, you continue to have a sense of purpose and hope that only God can give; that you know you are sent by God, not to be the greatest Precentor in the world or some kind of super priest, but to be who you are, and so to be the best you can be, secure in knowing that in God you matter. My hope for you and my prayer for you is: that it not be the privilege of being sent that motivates you, although it is a great honour to be sent by God, but that you are motivated to share the very life of Jesus himself, in word and sacrament, in loving service, sharing the story of God’s hope for the world, and by sharing yourself in this way, you

⁷ Ibid., p. 189.

might make the lives of others that little bit better. May this be your joy and your privilege, as it is our joy and privilege to do likewise, in Christ our Lord. Amen.

Kushner, Harold S. *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough*. Pan, 1987.