Ecclesiastes: An ancient Jewish sage ponders the meaning of life.

Today we begin a new series of readings for TFTD to take us through to Lent. Philip Alexander starts us off with an introduction to the book of Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes is one of the least read books of the Old Testament — and yet it is in some ways one of the best known. All sorts of sayings from it have entered everyday English, and people use them in all sorts of contexts without knowing where they came from, or what originally they meant.
“Vanity of vanities, vanity of vanities, all is vanity” (1:2)
“There is nothing new under the sun” (1:9)
“To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which planted” (3:1)
“A living dog is better than a dead lion” (9:4)
“The race is not to the swift nor the battle to the strong” (9:11)
“He that digs a pit shall fall into it” (10:8)
“Cast your bread upon the waters: for you shall find it after many days” (11:1)
“Where the tree falls, there it shall lie” (11:12)
“The words of the wise are as goads” (12:11)
“Of the making of books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh” (12:12).
It’s like the man who read Shakespeare for the first time and complained that he was full of clichés, not realising that many of our everyday expressions are borrowed from the bard.
Ecclesiastes is well worth studying but it is useful to get a few things straight before you plunge in. The book is apparently attributed to king Solomon. He is not directly named anywhere in the text, but “the son of David, king in Jerusalem” mentioned in the opening verse can only be him. No other son of David was king in Jerusalem. The text describes Solomon with an odd word – the Hebrew word *Qoheleth*. No one is quite sure what this means. It doesn’t look like a proper name (nobody was called “Qoheleth”, certainly not Solomon). Rather it must denote an action or an office, but what might this be? The root of the word in Hebrew is a well known verb *qahal*, “to assemble people”, so Qoheleth should mean some like “The One who Assembles the People”, “The One Who convenes the Assembly”. That was how the very old Greek translation understood it. It used

the Greek word *ekklesiastes* (from the Greek *ekklesia*, meaning an assembly – the word, actually used in the New Testament for the Church), and that is the origin of the standard English title for the book – Ecclesiastes. The King James Version assumed that the office referred to the speaker of the assembly, and so translated "the Preacher". That makes pretty good sense in context, but most modern translations do not translate but use the Hebrew term itself – Qoheleth.

Though the book is attributed to Solomon all scholars are now agreed that Solomon didn't write it. It was written centuries after his death, probably between 250 and 200 BC. The author has adopted the persona of Solomon for literary reasons. This was a well-known device in the ancient world: nobody would have been fooled by it. No one reading Ecclesiastes in the 3rd century BC, when it first appeared, would have thought it was a long-lost treatise by King Solomon. There were several reasons why Solomon was our author's chosen persona. Solomon was famous for his wisdom and what Ecclesiastes offers is wisdom, so the author, to commend his views to his readers, invokes the patron of ancient Jewish Wisdom – King Solomon. And the persona of Solomon serves his purposes well at 1:12-2:11, where it helps him to make dramatically the point that even if one had acquired all the knowledge and wisdom of a Solomon, had built all the great buildings, planted all the vineyards and gardens, and acquire all the fabulous wealth that he achieved, in the end it would still amount to "vanity and a chasing after the wind" (2:11).

Wisdom was a strand of ancient Hebrew literature, different from law (which we find in the Pentateuch), or history (which we find in the books of Samuel and Kings), or prayer (which we find in the Psalms), or prophecy (which we find in the great prophetic books such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel). The most important wisdom text in the Old Testament is the Book of Proverbs. Wisdom was the sort of philosophy of ancient Israel, but it was a very practical, homespun philosophy. It claimed to teach people how to live well. How to have a happy and successful life. In some ways it was like the modern self-help manuals, shelves of which are found in our bookshops. The wise man was like the modern life-coach or life-style guru, who offered people guidance on how to live well. But Qoheleth, though he belonged to the wisdom tradition, subverted and challenged it. Conventional wisdom urged people to pursue wealth, success and influence, and claimed to tell them how to do this. Ah but, says Qoheleth, suppose you do all this. Suppose you are as wildly successful at it as a Solomon, will it bring you any *lasting* happiness? You toil all your life, denying yourself simple pleasures, to amass wealth, but in the end you will die, like everyone else, and may never enjoy your hard-won gains. Still worse, you may have an heir who is a ne'er-do-well who blows his inheritance, or if you have no son, your wealth passes to a stranger who enjoys it instead of you. What, in essence, Qoheleth is saying is: Question the basic

assumption of Wisdom that the way to happiness is through wealth and influence. Qoheleth's book is not systematic. He circles round the same problem again and again, and comes up, sometimes, with contradictory answers. This reflects his own confusion and uncertainty as to where true happiness is to be found. His little book may have been written towards the end of his life, and report honestly the different answers to the meaning of life that appealed to him at different times. Much of his teaching is timeless. In a materialistic age, when we are bombarded with advertising trying to get us to buy more and more things as a way to happiness and the good life, his basic point has surely never been more relevant. Some of his aphorisms are wonderful, timeless and deserve to be pondered and savoured. They speak to the human condition in any age.

But he didn't find the real meaning of life. He was clear eyed about what was wrong with the wisdom of his day, but his varying answers reflect his uncertainty and dissatisfaction with his own solutions. He believed in God, and sensed he had a purpose for his world, but he had no idea what it was. He thought death was the end: there was no afterlife, and that rammed home for him the ultimate futility of life. But we know better, because we have the fuller revelation in Christ. We know more of God's purposes for the world. We believe that death is not the end. Qoheleth has to be read within the context of Scripture as a whole, as marking a stage in God's ongoing revelation to ancient Israel.

Qoheleth lived at a time of transition. He challenged accepted wisdom. His scepticism helped to keep it honest – grounded in reality, and facing up to the problems it raised. He thus helped it to reach out for a deeper understanding of God's ways in the world. I am glad that the Synagogue in its wisdom chose (after some debate) to include Qoheleth in its Bible, and that the Church had the good sense to follow suit. Qoheleth's is one of the many voices of Scripture, and it has a particular relevance just at the moment. I am sure many of us over the past year have felt despair, have been sometimes overwhelmed by the futility, the seeming pointlessness of our existence. Qoheleth says to us: "It's okay to feel this way. Be honest with yourself, and here are some words that may help you give vent to your feelings." But at the same time this should stir us to search the Scriptures to find the answers which Qoheleth never found.

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