

Remember your Creator in the days of your youth

Ecclesiastes chs 11-12

Many thanks to everyone who has contributed to our Thoughts for the Day on the book of Ecclesiastes — especially to Robin's father, Professor Michael Pye, for today's final reflections. Tomorrow is the first day of Lent (Ash Wednesday) and we will begin a new series reading through Mark's Gospel for Lent.

Ecclesiastes 12:1 *Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth, Before the difficult days come, And the years draw near when you say, "I have no pleasure in them".* (NKJV)

There are some uncomfortable words in the book of “The Preacher” and some of them are quite trenchant, not for the fainthearted. Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. Everything is useless. Everything is transient. We are close to the Buddhist diagnosis of existence here (and indeed not far from the Buddhist medicine).

But by the way, there must be a special place in purgatory for academics, if we follow The Preacher, for of making many books there is no end. There is a time to read, and there is a time to write. Until that time comes to an end, we might add, when all the books will be burned in a great fire like the famous library of Alexandria, and indeed everything will be consumed in a hungry black hole.

There is a story that everybody who landed on the shores of Egypt in ancient times went through customs control and had to declare any books they were carrying. If a book was not already in the library of Alexandria they had to sit down and write out a copy. Then the original was deposited in the library, and they were sent on their way –with their copy. This tells us that the characteristic sin of librarians and bibliophiles is prudent avarice. That library is no more. Even prudent avarice cannot win.

The Preacher tried to tell us that there is a time for everything. But I don't really agree with that. There is not “a time to kill”. That is even forbidden in the Ten Commandments, which fall well short of the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount. As Christians we do not need to simply swallow whole every sentence which can be found in the Scriptures. And I believe that to be a sentence we should not repeat, at least not without surrounding commentary, and certainly not in a soulful song.

The old Testament scholar Gerhard von Rad used that section of *Ecclesiastes* to explain the Hebrew notion of “time” as being different from modern chronometry. In brief, “a time” is a season which calls for action. For example, there is a time to

plant, and a time to get weeding. He argued that this idea of the urgency of the time was carried through into the call of the Christian gospel.

As *The Preacher* saw it, there is a time to be young, and (for most people) there is a time to be old. Getting older is not necessarily much fun, and for some “the difficult days” are nothing but tiresome. But that is exactly why we should “remember”, that is, think carefully of our Creator in our youth, he says. This is not something that can be put off. It means *now*, as the King James Version puts it. If by chance you overlooked this earlier on, there is still time, there is still “the now” of your present moment. Youth is only relative.

There was a young man in Denmark whose family name was Kierkegaard (meaning “churchyard”) and I wonder whether he reflected particularly on gravestones and the transiency of life. As an existentialist he was not one for knuckling down under the great systems of philosophy and society which held sway in his time. He searched for a deeper sincerity, and for his own authenticity. And when he came across the book of *The Preacher*, he picked out this injunction as relevant to his condition, for he was himself “a youth” who could see the vanity of self-seeking, and imagine the days of trouble which would surely come, when it was “the time” for that.

Quite by chance, just as *Ecclesiastes* was being introduced in these “thoughts for the day”, I came across a book on my shelves that contains the “edifying discourses” of this same Kierkegaard. The book is about sixty years old, and (having travelled from place to place) the paperback binding fell apart in my hands, opening at his discourse on this very subject. He reflects on what might be the various thoughts of those who, now much older, had remembered their Creator in the days of their youth. I recommend his discourse to young and old alike! And here is my own thought for the day: If you think of God when you are young, God will think of you when you are old. I think that is what *The Preacher* had in mind. He might almost have been thinking of “the Holy Ghost, the Comforter”. For that too, there is a time, as we get older.

Michael Pye

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