



St Marylebone
Parish Church

Trinity 7 11am Choral Eucharist

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14 & 2:18-23; Luke 12:13-21

‘Vanity of vanities, all is vanity, says the Teacher.’

Meaningless, pointless, senseless, futile, useless – a chasing after the wind
- striving for the unattainable.

It makes me feel like I’m back at work.

I’m a psychiatrist you see. I worked as a psychiatrist for many years before I started training as a priest and I’ll go back to an NHS job as a psychiatrist after I’m ordained. So I’ve heard a lot of people who sound as pessimistic as the Teacher in today’s reading. It speaks of unhappiness, toil, strain, pain, vexation and anxiety. Many of us have days like that, but for those living with depression such fatalism and despair can be a daily reality. Depression twists our thinking so that everything looks bleak and negative – ourselves, our world and our future.

Since one in four of us will experience a mental health problem of some kind each year, there’s a good chance that there are people here this morning for whom life seems as miserable as this reading sounds. Or if not, people who might have been here if depression hadn’t sapped their energy and motivation. Or people whose family members or friends would identify with those words. While I don’t think the author of Ecclesiastes was necessarily depressed, I’m glad of passages like this in

the Bible. They encourage us to wrestle with the fact that people of faith aren't immune to despair and to think about how we respond when we or those around us feel like that.

Ecclesiastes doesn't shy away from the times when life seems senseless, unjust and cruel. It recognizes that neither wealth nor wisdom nor power guarantee a happy life and that hedonism doesn't ultimately satisfy – a message very much in line with today's gospel reading. Although Ecclesiastes speaks of God, the author doesn't use the personal, covenant name of Yahweh (by which God revealed himself to Israel) but the name Elohim, which stresses the sovereignty and otherness of God. So, as for many of those experiencing depression, God may not have completely disappeared from the picture, but God does seem distant and remote – hardly a reassuring presence.

Although Ecclesiastes is the only book of this type in the Bible, the style was well known in the literature of the ancient near East from at least two millennia before Christ. It was called, appropriately enough, pessimism literature. Often it was unremittingly bleak – the Babylonian Dialogue of Pessimism, for instance, concludes that the only solution to the problem of life is suicide. That too is a conclusion I've heard plenty of times in my work as a psychiatrist, though it's still a tragedy every time.

Ecclesiastes though, despite confronting head on the perplexity, frustration and struggle of life, is punctuated with moments of hope and trust in God. The balance between struggle and hope varies over the course of the book, as it often does for those experiencing mental health problems. Many of the moments of hope are brief, as the Teacher advises his audience to eat, drink and find satisfaction in what they have, despite the unanswered questions (3:13, 5:18, 8:15, 9:7-10). That reminds me of some of the therapeutic strategies to help people with depression, focusing on engaging with and finding pleasure in the simple things of life. The book of Ecclesiastes reminds me too of some of the psalms,

which also hold together the apparent contradiction of complaint against God and trust in God.

That trust is important, but it may not be easy. The biblical commentator J. S. Wright sums up the message of Ecclesiastes like this: *‘God holds the key to the unknown – but he will not give it to you. Since you do not have the key, you must trust him to open the door.’*

All this reminds me too that as a psychiatrist, my role is sometimes to hold open a space where positive change can be a possibility, where hope can stay alive, even though the person themselves is so overwhelmed by hopelessness that they can’t believe that things can ever be better. It’s not always me that holds hope – sometimes the love of a family member or friend, their belief in the person, maybe their experience that the bad times have come to an end before, is far more effective. Often though, because I have the skills to name an illness and to put forward a treatment plan, to suggest medicine or therapy or other support that I’m confident has a good chance of improving things, I carry hope. Not an insubstantial thing that ignores the realities of life or pretends it’s easy to make everything ok, but a commitment to stay with someone in the darkness and work with them for their healing, and to keep alert for the glimmers of new light.

I’ve said that it’s often my professional skills that allow me to bring hope. That’s true – but what’s equally true is that as Christians, all of us carry a story of hope within which the low days most of us have and the depression some of us experience can be set. We believe in a God who, in Jesus, knew the most difficult experiences of human life - betrayal, rejection, suffering, abandonment and death. However, because Jesus’ death wasn’t the end – because he rose again, ascended into heaven, and sits on God’s right hand – as we’ll affirm in the creed in a few minutes time – we know that darkness and despair don’t have the last word. Ecclesiastes discourages us both from living as though God is irrelevant and from unrealistic optimism; instead it encourages us to hang in there

with our faith even when life looks meaningless. Our faith in the Risen Christ, who still bore the wounds of his passion, gives us the hope of a better day that we need for ourselves and those we love, even in the middle of depression and despair.

So may the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ give us the grace to be alongside those who need our company and to live together through the darkness into His light. *Amen.*