4 August 2019: Choral Eucharist
The Seventh Sunday after Trinity
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‘You have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.’

In nomine…

Today’s first reading gave us the famous words of the Preacher: ‘Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, / vanity of vanities! All is vanity’. The Preacher – or the Teacher as our translation renders it – sounds a refrain that reverberates through the twelve Chapters of Ecclesiastes: all is vanity.

The Teacher’s thoroughgoing cynicism seems to speak of the futility of human existence. His sustained world-weariness strikes a note unlike any other book of the Bible. As John Pridmore has said, when reading Ecclesiastes aloud one should do so ‘sadly and wearily, interspersing one’s delivery with the occasional deep melancholy sigh’. For those familiar with Winnie the Pooh, the voice of the Teacher is the voice of Eeyore: ‘Good morning. If it is a good morning. Which I doubt.’; ‘After all, what are birthdays? Here today and gone tomorrow.’ It’s not hard to see, then, why the compilers of our lectionary have ensured that we rarely hear from Ecclesiastes on a Sunday morning. This book is an outlier to the predominant biblical tradition. Generally, the books of scripture, for all that they acknowledge human vice, error and weakness, nonetheless proclaim the dignity and worth of human life, made as it is in the image and likeness of God. Ecclesiastes is the exception.

So what are we to make of the Teacher’s utterances? I think the key to appreciating the book is to engage with its most prominent term, the word usually rendered as ‘vanity’. ‘Vanity’ is a perfectly legitimate translation, but if you turn back just one page in the Bible, to the last chapter of the previous book, Proverbs, you’ll find the same word, often translated rather differently: ‘Charm is deceptive, and beauty fleeting, but the woman who fears the Lord is honoured’ (REB). Hebel is the Hebrew word: Hebel of hebel; all is
hebel. But the epithet applied to beauty in Proverbs is hebel too: beauty is fleeting. So the Teacher might equally be proclaiming a slightly different truth: fleeting, fleeting, everything is fleeting. Of course, one word can have a number of meanings and alongside ‘vain’ and ‘fleeting’, the Hebrew word is translated elsewhere as ‘futile’, ‘meaningless’, ‘enigmatic’, even ‘absurd’. But the drawback with each of these options is that they are all abstract, whereas the basic metaphor here is from the physical world: hebel is ‘vapour’ or ‘mist’. Mist is of course a passing phenomenon, but it is also a beautiful one, something that, for all its fleetingness, we may treasure while it lasts. Perhaps this takes us closer to what the Teacher has in mind. Human labour and striving, even for the Teacher, may not be entirely worthless, just destined to pass and perish.

This point is sharpened by the biblical scholar, Ellen Davis. As she shows in her commentary, hebel is probably one of a large number of allusions in Ecclesiastes to the first book of the Bible, Genesis. The word hebel is linked to Abel: Abel, the son with his brother Cain of Adam and Eve. Abel, you will recall, despite his godliness, perhaps even because of it, is murdered by his brother Cain. As Ellen Davis says:

The names of the two brothers are heavy with portent: Permanence [on the one hand] and Impermanence [on the other], Possession and Ephemerality. The Teacher sees that the history of adam, humankind, mirrors the history of the younger brother hebel/Abel, who enters the biblical narrative only to die. His death is nonsensical, as is every murder. But is his life then meaningless, entirely absurd? The one thing we know about hebel/Abel is that he offered the best of his flock as a sacrifice that brought God pleasure (Gen 4:4). And is not just that the point of human life, to give some pleasure to God, to make our work in this world holy by offering something of it to God? (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs, pp.168-9)

Read this way, the Teacher’s message is not so much one of thoroughgoing cynicism as of therapeutic realism. The harsh realities of life are all too clear in the needless murder of Abel by Cain, prototype of so much human inhumanity that has followed it. But it is the very fragility of life that makes it so precious.

Origen of Alexandria, one of the great theologians of the early Church, saw Ecclesiastes as the stepping stone book of the Christian faith. The three books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs follow on one from another at the heart of the Old Testament. These books were, for Origen, three stages on the path to becoming wise for
salvation. Proverbs, he wrote, sets out ‘the most basic instruction’ regarding ‘good conduct’; Song of Songs, on which Canon Harrison preached at Matins, unfolds ‘the most sublime religious achievements’ regarding ‘the mystical contemplation of divine things’; and, between them, stands Ecclesiastes as ‘the next to last stop in the project of learning to love’. Rather like Purgatory in Dante’s Commedia, Ecclesiastes heals us of false optimism based on pride, greed or other vices: the Teacher in Ecclesiastes ‘purges us of naïve and wrongful earthly attachments, advancing holy fear’ (Treier, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, p.121, from which the references to Origen above are also cited).

With that lesson in mind, let’s turn to today’s gospel, with Jesus’s parable of the rich man with his barns. ‘Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions’, says Jesus before he tells his parable. Greed here is pleonexia in the original Greek and its root meaning is simply the desire to have more. The object of the rich man’s pleonexia is on the face of it simply wealth for its own sake, but the pulling down of old barns to build new and larger ones implies more: an insatiable urge to display his wealth and power and to luxuriate in the apparent security it brings. But pleonexia need not be obsessed with wealth: it could just as well be the accumulation of shoes, Twitter likes or Facebook friends.

Etymologically pleonexia means the desire for more, but spiritually it is, as Paul teaches in today’s second reading, idolatry (Colossians 3:5). Idolatry is what we indulge in when we make anything less than God our source of security and hope. It won’t always look as if we are bowing down to graven images and offering them sacrifices, but metaphorically that is precisely what we are up to when we invest created things, rather than their Creator, with ultimate significance.

In our culture pleonexia typically takes the form of the quest for novelty: the insatiable desire for the new that is the lifeblood of consumerism. But, as most of us know to our cost, the acquisition of new things is a doomed quest: once acquired instantly they become old and the cycle of consumerist pleonexia repeats. As the Teacher famously observes, ‘there is nothing new under the sun’.

‘There is nothing new under the sun’ – that is in the realm of creation. For real newness is found elsewhere and by other means. In God we find, as the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar put it, an Abgrund von Neuheit, ‘an abyss of newness in which God’s eternity is always new, always marvellous’ (Balthasar, Homo Creatus Est, p.178). Or as that great popular theologian of the last century, Sydney Carter, put it:
You are older than the world can be,
You are younger than the life in me.
Ever old and ever new,
Keep me travelling along with you.

'Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: [above all] greed (which is idolatry)…
being renewed in knowledge according to the image of [your] creator. In that renewal
there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian,
slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!'.

In nomine…