Sermon on Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14, 2:17-23

I’ve never preached a sermon on the biblical book of Ecclesiastes which is strange because it’s one of my favourite books of the Bible.

The reason why I haven’t to this point has more to do with the lectionary and timing than anything else; oh, yeah, there’s the problem of “what the heck is Ecclesiastes on about anyway?”

When you read it for the first time, without a commentary you can get seriously confused. It seems so pessimistic, so joyless, so anti achievement, so completely opposed to much that our society and culture holds dear.

But that’s what fascinates me about the book; it is, in fact, a profoundly pro-human book; “the teacher” who takes on the persona of Solomon and Solomon’s fabled wisdom, wants to invite all of us into a life that is truly good

Our problem, of course, is that what Ecclesiastes tells us is truly good is largely foreign to what the advertisers want to sell us as the American or the Canadian dream.

The value of Ecclesiastes is precisely its pitilessness in telling us this; it holds no prisoners and makes no excuses for the difficulties we find ourselves in as people and as societies.

I’ve also become convinced that though Jesus never directly quotes it; he’s very aware of the book’s message; in humorous parables like the one in today’s gospel Jesus is in fact paraphrasing the book’s central message in hopes that we’ll laugh at our irrationality and begin wondering about a different path.

That message, probably more centrally, more controversially, than in any other book of the Bible is contained in one small word: hebel.

It’s the word translated by NRSV translators, all skilled linguists, as vanity: vanity of vanities, everything is vanity. It is the first word and the last word of today’s reading and well over half of all its uses in the Hebrew Bible can be found in this one book.

The problem is that the word is notoriously difficult to translate because it contains a nuanced idea.

If you look up “vanity” in an English dictionary you’ll find several meanings; we can eliminate one of those meanings toot sweet: we’re not talking about a kitchen vanity, a kitchen cabinet: “Kitchen vanity of kitchen vanities; everything is a kitchen cabinet!”

Probably the most common meaning of vanity in English is “that person is vain; that person is full of vanity.” i.e. full of self-admiration and self-regard: narcissistic!

But that doesn’t get us closer to what’s going on. Some translations like the very popular NIV, translate it as meaningless but this really throws us off “the scent” because though “the Teacher” tells us that much of what we do can become meaningless; it usually isn’t by itself, without our misuse.

Vanity is the correct translation, then, if we use it in the sense of its Middle English and Latin root, fleeting or empty, like a whisp of smoke, like a mere breath.

Everything is quickly over, almost over as we’re experiencing it; almost over before it begins: any activity, any pursuit, even the beauty of work well done, even the pursuit of profound wisdom; similarly any moment: be it a feeling of pain, joy, satisfaction, be it love!

When one begins to read Ecclesiastes with this definition of hebel/vanity we read: All is fleeting says the Teacher. All is a mere breath, a chasing after the wind…even our very lives!

Nothing lasts! And yet we often persist irrationally as if it will or can, for us! This leads, as the teacher notes to a kind of reaction within us: we put more and more effort into “gain,” whether that be through our work, through our accumulation of possessions or through our achievements, but then we become disillusioned when it doesn’t secure our lives;

or we see others, including our children, benefitting from what should have been credited to us, or misusing what we’ve worked so hard for.

We apply ourselves to a skill, say, the writing of homilies and find out that most of what I do isn’t taken seriously at all. I can so relate to what the teacher says, “even at night my mind doesn’t rest!”

What is evil is when what is a mere breath, our work, our efforts, our experiences has been weighted with the expectation of permanence and solidity.

Whenever we put our eggs in the basket of work, a relationship, a hobby, a self-image, or, the accumulation of money or possessions we are in for a shock.

We create a climate for eventual if not immediate deep dissatisfaction.

A good friend who is not religious and who works as a psychologist tells me about clients for whom their significant relationship is a religion. And because it has taken the place of God they can’t see it from a proper perspective; they expect everything from it; security, rest, excitement that makes shooting stars dull, friendship, challenge, adventure and the list goes on and on.

But of course it can’t be all of that and even one of those things can’t last or be permanent within a relationship!

We foolishly, irrationally put ultimate worth into something, even a really good something that is hebel, a breath, fleeting, something that by its very definition cannot last.

Is the Teacher saying that we shouldn’t put effort into our work or our relationships? That we shouldn’t plan for the future or seek to accumulate financial resources?

No, the text today, the Gospel text today, is not necessarily inviting us to give up working or relating or having pleasurable experiences. I can’t imagine not pursuing wisdom, loving my work, or enjoying sharing food around a table.

What is going on here is far more than a morality play: don’t have so much fun, don’t enjoy your life too much; don’t over indulge or collect too many toys.

What is going on is the very possibility of enjoyment, of fun, of, to use a dangerous sounding word, sensuality; how we might learn to live well as God’s creations in God’s world.

If we try to “possess” or “master” what is in essence “a mere breath:” we dissipate and dissolve it’s beauty and power. Want to make sex boring? Tell people they can have sex with as many people as they want regardless of commitment; want to begin to think that working hard is useless? Make work about gaining stuff whose enjoyment only lasts a few days or months before the shine wears off.

One of my supreme failures in ministry happened when I tried to help a young man caught in this very loop who couldn’t break it even though I tried everything to help him. He worked to gain toys; he had sex in order to experience a momentary thrill; Each day the only way he got out of bed was to repeat this cycle.

He committed suicide and the funeral at St. Matthew was packed with young people, many of whom lived similarly, a few of whom told me later, that what they were doing would only produce more suicides.

So Jesus in today’s gospel text (called Teacher – a nice touch given Ecclesiasties) isn’t against the man getting his fair share of the estate; for the sake of the man’s soul, that is, what is truly good, he’s against putting the wrong value on something that will not last, or in this case, the man’s body won’t last.

To come to a proper perspective on life and all that it offers one must be—and I love this line—rich towards God. That is, find a way of aligning our desire with God’s desire; living from and with God’s desire.

Living in the moment, yes, but living as Jesus will say elsewhere, with the same kind of basic trust in God’s goodness that the creatures exhibit unthinkingly; we are meant to adopt their trust, but freely choose it, freely align ourselves with a basic humility that accepts limitations, that understands nothing lasts and that is able to find joy and satisfaction in ordinary experiences and service to others.

This ordering of our desire, this re-ordering of desire can only be accomplished through persistent attention, generosity, thankfulness, service and the silence of prayer that simply that opens us to both the breath-like nature of existence and the Ground of all Being: God

So says the tradition, so says Ecclesiastes when at the end he reiterates his original refrain, vanity of vanities, all is vanity; but this time with awareness that our mere breath returns to God who gave it in the first place.

It is those who have done the “ordinary” well who will gain their souls, be found rich towards God and come to know that the inheritance they will receive is something they’ve already been enjoying. Amen.