

English sermon. Don't give up, but keep on - enjoying life and doing what is right.

Texts from Ecclesiastes and Matthew 6, 33-34.

Why so gloomy?

I'd like to preach on some verses from one of my favourite books of the Bible. You heard some excerpts from it in the Old Testament reading – the book of Ecclesiastes, the one that starts in the King James translation with the sentence “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” Now you may be surprised that this book is one of my favourites – but it's so gloomy and dismal, - everything is meaningless and a chasing after wind - how can you like that?

Interestingly, this is the sort of reaction I often get when I tell people who my favourite singer is – the Canadian songwriter Leonard Cohen, who sadly died last year. The one who wrote Suzanne and Hallelujah. What, you like him – but his songs are so depressing and monot-onous! But the book of Ecclesiastes and the songs of Leonard Cohen have something in common – they may sound gloomy at first but underneath the surface they contain a deep wisdom which is extremely relevant and helpful for our lives today.

A crisis of motivation - politically

We are living at a time when we are faced with a crisis of motivation.

What's the use? You can't change anything anyway! How often do we hear ourselves or others saying that! Many of us in the past have worked hard and prayed hard for peace and justice, for the protection of the environment. We believed perhaps that our efforts would gradually help to make the world a better place, but when we look at the world today there seems to be more war and violence than ever before. In so many countries we see democracy under attack and unjust regimes taking control, reducing people's freedom. We felt that things were getting better, that humankind was on a slow but upward path. Now the opposite seems to be the case. So what's the

use of getting involved? What's the use of voting in the coming elections – it won't change anything!

and personally

This situation is often mirrored on a personal level when we observe the development of our spirituality, the practice of what we believe. The things we resolved in the past to do in order to deepen our faith – the books we've read about prayer and meditation, the courses we've visited, the sermons we've heard. We've tried to put all this into practice and sometimes we even felt that we were making progress as Christians. And then come the setbacks and we notice how we are often stuck in our old habits and feel as though we are back to square one. So what's the use – we can't even change ourselves, let alone the world?

Solomon's experiment

Ecclesiastes is about a man, King Solomon, who set out on a long-term experiment in order to find the answer to two questions.

Firstly: is it possible through the pursuit of wisdom to find out the meaning of life?

Secondly: Is it possible to know whether the work we do on this earth is actually worthwhile?

His initial results are quite sobering. He says that if we go on the basis of our experience the answer to both questions must be no.

1. Gaining wisdom does not in fact make us happier. "I applied my mind to wisdom and found it all to be meaningless." No one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. It passeth knowledge, as we sang just now in the hymn.

2. And generally there seems to be no clear connection between the work we do and the fruit it brings. "Sow your seed and let your hands not be idle, for you do not know which will succeed." This conclusion fits our experience – sometimes when we try to do good in a difficult situation it does actually help, and sometimes it seems to make things worse! We really wanted only to help a friend when he was down but he took it completely the wrong way and now doesn't talk to us any more! Appears to be no logic to it. Thus the initial conclusion to his experiment is "All these things are

meaningless, a chasing after the wind.” Or “Ah but I may as well try and catch the wind” as Donovan once put it.

Enjoy

So what does Solomon the teacher suggest we do? Give up all hope, and sink into a hole of deep depression? Interestingly he recommends quite the opposite. Scattered throughout his book there are altogether seven appeals to gratefully receive the life God has given us and to enjoy it. “Eat your bread with enjoyment and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has long ago approved what you do.” Who would have thought it? The key word in this book is “enjoy”. Not the hedonistic pleasure-seeking attitude “let us eat drink and be merry for tomorrow we die”. More like “Take each new moment as a gift of God, whether it involves work or pleasure, and enjoy it. In the end only God knows the meaning of it all.” “There is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live – this is the gift of God.”

and be in the present moment

In other words we should not be thinking so much about what it all means, but rather be in the present moment. We live in a society which is dominated by setting goals for growth and efficiency. If it doesn't bring profits then don't do it. We measure the value of our work not in the work itself but by the results that it may or may not bring in the future. Solomon says we should sow our seeds and work with our hands not because of what should come out of it but because it is in itself good.

Jesus takes up Solomon's subject

Before we relate this insight to our situation in the world today, let's look at how Jesus takes up this subject in the sermon on the mount in Matthew's gospel. Interestingly he quotes Solomon as an example: “Consider the lilies of the field, they neither toil nor spin. Yet not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these.” As an educated Jewish rabbi Jesus almost certainly would have known the book of Ecclesiastes - and so he goes on to develop the theme of this book, repeating Solomon's message: “Do not worry about

tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself”. But then he adds his own very special emphasis “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.” There is a meaning. God is establishing his kingdom, not sometime in the future but right now. We might not understand how and we might not see so much of it, but we can trust that he is working his purpose out. In everything we receive gratefully from his hands and in every good thing that we do. That which Solomon, living several hundred years before Jesus, only sensed vaguely, Jesus expresses more clearly. Live and work in the present moment – and trust in God for what the future holds. His kingdom will come.

So what does this mean in relation to the crisis of motivation with which the sermon started?

Practical consequences

Firstly: we need not have a bad conscience about enjoying the life that God has given us. This sounds easy but is not always obvious. Many Christians have been brought up to believe that enjoyment is very low down on the list of things they should be striving for, and you can understand why. When we hear through the media about what people are suffering in various parts of the world, or even when we are conscious of the suffering of some of the people we know, it sometimes seems almost immoral for us to enjoy good food and good health. It’s encouraging to hear from the Bible that this does not have to be the case. “Drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has long ago approved what you do.” (Some Christians still maintain that he is only referring to non-alcoholic wine, but I’ll leave that interpretation up to you!) Enjoy the children that God has given you.

Secondly: Both Solomon and Jesus remind us of where our true motivation should lie in our work for his kingdom. Do we only do good in order to achieve tangible results, or do we do it simply because it is good? Let me give you an example. A year or so back when there was an influx of refugees from Syria and other countries there was also a wave of enthusiasm from people volunteering to

help them feel at home and become integrated. Already after a few months this enthusiasm began to diminish, partly because a few terrorist incidents raised doubts in people's minds as to whether it was all worth it and partly because the helpers were disappointed when some of the refugees showed insufficient signs of gratitude. This is one of the things we had to learn in Hamburg when we set up a project to assist asylum seekers. Are we only doing this to achieve visible results, seeing how people are settling in to a new society? Are we only doing this to experience people's gratitude? Or are we doing it because it is the right thing to do, regardless of the results?

Perhaps you are involved in other areas of voluntary or professional work – in social or church work, in counseling, or in one of the most difficult areas of all – bringing up a family or working at your relationship with your partner. And perhaps you know all too well those times when the motivation wanes. Is it worth it? It doesn't seem to do any good!

So don't be discouraged when you see little fruit from your labours, regardless of which field you are working in. The message is: keep on doing it because it's right. Even if the world at large and your situation in particular appear to be rapidly going downhill. Keep on keeping on – and trust God for the rest.

Thirdly: the same applies to us personally when we become disheartened about the lack of progress of progress in our spirituality. Nowhere does the Bible promise us a continuous upward journey on the path to spiritual maturity. Rather it encourages us to keep on with prayer and meditation and whatever else we do to deepen our relationship to God. Don't despair if you feel you're moving backwards but remain in the moment and trust God that he is moving us along in ways we don't always see, let alone understand.

In fact this is a discipline that is often described by sportsmen and women when answering the silly questions put to them in interviews. If you're playing tennis, two sets down and four nil behind in games, how does it feel? All you need to do is to be in the moment and concentrate on this one point. Let the rest take care of itself. Who

knows, you might still win! But don't think of that, because that will distract you from the present moment! Instead of playing that winning passing shot down the line, you'll put the ball in the net!

I'd like to round off the sermon in the way I began – with a reference to the songwriter Leonard Cohen. In a few lines from his song Anthem he summarises for us in a very encouraging way the message of Ecclesiastes and indirectly also that of Jesus:

“The birds they sing at break of day.
Start again, I heard them say.
Don't dwell on what has passed away
Or what is yet to be.
Ring those bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything.
That's how the light gets in.”

So don't despair and don't give up. Enjoy the gifts and the tasks that God has given you and keep on keeping on. Seek ye first the kingdom of God in the here and now – and let God take care of the rest.