

Key Questions Group, 9th March 2015 - Bill Evershed

“Mustn’t grumble”? Over the hill and under the weather

King David and King Solomon led merry, merry lives,
With many, many lady friends and many, many wives
But when old age crept over them, with many, many qualms,
King Solomon wrote the Proverbs and King David wrote the Psalms.

I’m not offering this as a serious piece of source criticism. The message I want to take from this text is the author’s clear implication that the books of Proverbs and Psalms are the result of a lifetime’s reflection, and the fruit of old age, “all passion spent”. So - if you buy this argument - you might imagine that for anyone approaching middle-to-old age, they’re a useful source for reflection.

I, on the other hand, want to suggest that Psalms and Proverbs make no such claims, and while many may use them in this way, they were not so intended. I want to suggest that if you want a book which really does claim to be the summary of a life’s thought, you need to look at Ecclesiastes.

I’m aware that this will not be an easy sell - in fact, if you HAVE looked at it, it will probably be more difficult than otherwise. Just to take a few of the more obvious points, it has an air of gloom about it, which, once penetrated, reveals quite a lot of bitterness, a smidgen of misogyny, and no obvious laughs. As we all know, it begins - depending on your translation - “Vanity of vanities, says the preacher, all is vanity”, and the rest of the book does not belie this early hint of a certain Eeyore-ish mood.

Now I have a confession. When I first suggested this topic, I had a fairly clear idea what I was going to say. Having thought about it for a few weeks, I’m now going to say something different, but - we all hope - better. In fact, by the time I’ve finished, some of you may wish I’d continued thinking about it for a good long time - say a couple of years - and avoided pronouncing.

Because my original thought was to look at what it feels like to be “ageing” - and clearly a lot of that was about what it feels like for ME to be ageing, because I can’t know much about what it feels like for everyone else. So, for example, my health is now not as good as it was, and I’m consequently on a variety of tablets. I’m often more tired than I was, but still required to perform at a full-time job. My children are now old enough to demand less of my time, but quite a lot more of my money. Etcetera, etcetera. Everyone could write their own script of how their lives change as they age.

It can also be a time of life when the narrative thrust - if I can put it that way - seems to drop off. For years one has been making one’s way, getting an education, qualifications, developing a career, having a family. One day you realise that last year’s Christmas letter would be perfectly serviceable again - indeed, if your friends have memories like yours, they wouldn’t notice the duplication. Once you had dreams and plans, and now you may have an awareness that there have been failures too, and that at least some of the dreams and plans may not happen.

Having made these points, I was then going to say, echoing Yeats, “Why should not old men - (or women) - be mad”. Are we not entitled to feel miserable, grumpy, cross at times, and doesn’t this conflict with a perceived need to demonstrate happiness and joy as part of the redeemed community? In this context, I was going to argue, the Book of Ecclesiastes is a useful corrective to the assumption that we’re supposed to be positive at all times (though - hey Mr Ecclesiastes, wouldn’t some of the time be possible to manage?)

Several things happened to undermine this approach. Firstly, I’m quite aware that all these gripes are the product of things that 95% of the world’s population could only dream of - a lifestyle that has allowed me to develop my bad health in relative luxury, and a health service that can treat it; a job, and a reasonable prospect of a pension at the end of it. The sort of life in which dreams and plans are realistic. My moans - certainly if carried on too long - sound increasingly hollow.

David’s sermon on 22nd February had almost a throwaway remark “It’s called growing up”, and as I replayed the worst of my moans, I could hear a voice saying “It’s not fair, I don’t want this, I want that.” It was the voice of a child. I’ve been “grown up” so long that when another stage of the process came along I saw it as an imposition. I retreated into childishness. But I have to carry on growing up. It’s all right to feel angry, but not to “let the sun go down on your anger” - to leave it unaddressed for too long.

One point I still maintain through this change of viewpoint, however, is that there are very few passages in the Bible specifically addressed to people as they experience the ageing process. The New Testament letters give brief snippets of advice about how to care for widows. Also - and I say this cautiously - Jesus in his earthly life did not experience old age - or seen from my perspective - much of middle age. In terms of handy hints for the ageing, we’re largely on our own.

So my emphasis has shifted - but I still think Ecclesiastes has a message for us. I’d like to take a lightning tour of the book, and for anyone who wants to repeat this when they get home, can I recommend using an unfamiliar translation - perhaps one that verges on paraphrase - to get the point of some of the analogies that are used.

Part of the book is in the form of autobiographical passages in which the writer explains the various ways in which he tried to enjoy life. He had a wealthy life - the life of a king. He studied wisdom. But the thought that he would die, that others would take over from him and inherit what he left gave him a feeling of the futility of it all. Considering the way in which powerful fools and criminals are preferred to the wise poor makes him feel that life is senseless. People’s obsession with money - over friendship - and when no good is to be had by accumulating more wealth - makes him feel miserable.

There are bitter passages when he says that it’s better to be dead - or never to have been born - than to be alive - and this isn’t said in any confidence in a life after death. “Who knows?” is his most confident assertion about this. On the other hand, there are passages at which I’ve seen convinced atheists nodding in agreement:

“I have seen good citizens die for doing the right things, and I have seen criminals live to a ripe old age. So don’t destroy yourself by being too good...Don’t die before your time by acting like a fool. Keep to the middle of the road.”

“Don’t listen to everything that everyone says, or you might hear your servant cursing you. Haven’t you cursed many others?”

I find the overall bitter-sweet flavour of many of the passages is captured in the verses that say: “Nothing on earth is more beautiful than the morning sun. Even if you live to a ripe old age, you should try to enjoy each day, because darkness will come and will last a long time. Nothing makes sense.”

Some commentators describe Ecclesiastes’ outlook as “cynical”, but I want to challenge that. To me, the essence of cynicism is an attitude of “well, what did you expect?” The author of Ecclesiastes has been around a long time, but has retained an innocence which still expects things to be different. “I do not understand why things work out this way - this is a very wrong”

So what is to be done? Extracting a few positives from a mass of negatives - the best thing we can do is enjoy eating, drinking, and working, and the love of friends and spouses (well, at least our own!) In fact the “Two are better than one” passage was one of the readings at my wedding.

I think it’s even possible to draw some connections with the message of Paul, but seen through a slightly distorting mirror. Because a key question for Ecclesiastes is “What’s the point?” - which can be the starting point for a genuine enquiry, as well as a cry of resignation. And the point that seems to give Ecclesiastes hope, and might give life meaning is our relationship with God. The rest of life is “vanity”, a word which seems to derive from the Hebrew for “exhaled breath”, as opposed to “Ruach” - Spirit - the inhaled breath which gives life, and is also the spirit of God. It’s vanity because it doesn’t last, isn’t meant to last, can’t be relied on. It’s like Paul’s image of everything being tested by fire, and only the gold surviving while the dross is destroyed. Ecclesiastes warns us that a lot of things in life are ultimately dross. This is a hard lesson to take to heart, especially if we’ve accumulated lots of nice dross.

The passage beginning “To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven” is one of the better known parts of Ecclesiastes, and I’d suggest this is because it matches our experience, and feels fairly upbeat. I’d like to suggest that this is a misunderstanding of how it fits Ecclesiastes’ argument. I think that he’s saying BECAUSE there are times when certain actions are right, and other times when the exact opposite actions are right, THEREFORE you cannot develop a morality based on the concept of “right actions”. Wisdom literature like the Book of Proverbs sets out practical guidance to wise and foolish behaviour. Ecclesiastes enormously qualifies this by saying “except when it’s the other way round”.

Paul, too, would say that at the heart of faith is a relationship, and actions follow from that relationship. We can’t act so as to get into the relationship, any more than I can act the part of someone’s son in hope that I’ll turn into his son. Actions - “works of the law” are not the key. Ecclesiastes would say actions are vanity. “Remember your creator”, he says, and do it early, because the final stage of vanity is when the body starts to lose touch with the rest of the world, as the ageing process starts to bring physical deterioration.

Paul asks “What can separate us from the love of God?”, and answers “Nothing can - not life or death, not angels or powers, not the present or the future”. And Ecclesiastes echoes this by emphasizing a future in which the senses begin to fail, and finally our last breath - our last “vanity” - goes back to God. This future, in which we lose touch with the world, brings us back to God.

When Jonah went into a gigantic sulk because God had NOT after all destroyed the city of Nineveh, God asked him “Do you do well to be angry?” and when Jonah said “Actually yes”, God gave him time to reflect and grow up, and calm down. So, to try to answer my question “Mustn’t grumble?” I’d say clearly there are times when life gets us down, and we shouldn’t try to gloss over the fact. And I’d say God is prepared to meet us in this angry mood, and help us work through it. I also think it’s important not to get into habits of grumbling, and the expectation that things will go badly. Ecclesiastes (perhaps the last person you’d expect to say it) says “Do not say ‘Why is it that the former days were better than these?’ For it is not from wisdom that you ask about this.” I realise this is easy advice to dish out; less easy to apply and take to heart.

“In the day of prosperity, be happy, But in the day of adversity consider - God has made the one as well as the other”

A book like Ecclesiastes makes it clear that we shouldn’t rely too much on all we have and enjoy. It will pass. That passing may pain us. We may well grumble and complain - and this isn’t anything to be ashamed of, or to feel we have to hide away. Be truthful to God in getting through this. To pretend to give much more advice would be to make this more of an exercise in hypocrisy than it has already been. So to conclude: Grumble - but learn. Complain - but grow up.