

One night, Mark, in his sleep, turned to me and said in a world weary voice, 'what's the point?' , then promptly turned over and started snoring.

I never discovered what dream or thought had caused such a negative attitude. Maybe he'd been reading Ecclesiastes. This is a book that was once described to me as the rantings of a manic depressive. The theologian Bruegemann puts it slightly less emotively, he describes it as the far edge of negativity, and states that it represents the far edge of the Old Testament, both culturally and epistemologically. Whether you agree with that or not, I doubt that anyone could describe Ecclesiastes as a cheery book.

The overarching theme is vanity, all is vanity, or, to put it another way. 'What's the point?'

It raises all the key questions about human life and its meaning but with such a world weariness. This is a book of struggle. The psalmists affirm that if you are righteous you will prosper, your children will never go hungry, all will be well. But Koheleth, the writer of Ecclesiastes, is not fooled. He has observed, as we all have, that the innocent suffer, that there is a chance and randomness about how pain is inflicted, that sits uneasily with the idea that God rewards people according to how just they are.

This book was written after the exile and shows its Greek influences. But the writer was a three thinker, in many ways like Paul - an independent thinker who took the accepted religious views and married them to his own experience, and from that union produced something new.

You may well ask why such a profoundly depressing book is part of the bible.

Here is an author who, whilst accepting the difference between right and wrong, and producing some wonderful poetic passages – the most well known being from Chapter 3 'for everything there is a season', cannot see the point of life. Yet, and this is why I think the book is important, he knows with all his being that God is at the heart of the mystery. The book ends with the line 'Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man'.

This is real faith. Koheleth, whoever he might have been, has experienced life as the pits. It kicks you when you are down; you try your very best and it gets you nowhere. Yet, whilst he cannot understand this, instinctively he knows that God is central, God is important, God is why we exist.

A few people seem to have a charmed life. I am often amazed by people I come across who are even older than me who say that no-one they love has ever died. Other families, quite unfairly, have endured repeated loss.

Most of us at some time will have had that experience of all that you have achieved being undone by someone else or some external factor.

Two weeks ago, I carefully wrote everything I needed for this week so that I would not be so busy, having had a family wedding yesterday. But, when I turned on my laptop, nothing worked. I could not access the date. I could not print anything. I thought 'what was the point of doing all that'. On other occasions, I have achieved something only to have someone else undo all that I had done. I think that is even more galling.

All that we do, all that we achieve, can be undone by others who come after us. Does that make it pointless? Does that mean it is not worth the effort? Absolutely not. We to some extent shape the future, but we do not own it. We do not control it, however much we might like to.

The earth is the Lord's. We are sojourners, and we need to tread lightly.

It is natural, however, for us to want to leave our mark. We would like to be able to leave some money for our children. We would like people to remember us for what we have done and many good people are indeed remembered. We have a memorial in this church to William Wilberforce. This week we had the funeral service for Bob Cargill, the last headmaster of Bishop Gilpin, a much loved man, whose commitment and faith built up the school. But in time memories fade. Situations change. We hope there will never again be slavery in this country. We hope that Bishop Gilpin will continue to be a great school. We hope. But we know too that sometimes, such hopes are confounded.

The problems arise when we think that our part is sacred, that it must not be touched or interfered with. The reality is that our part is humble and small when viewed against the realm of eternity.

We should neither live just for the pleasures of the moment - no 'eat, drink and be merry' - nor concern ourselves too much about what happens to our possessions, our accumulated wisdom, our knowledge and skills after we have died.

All that matters is that we live our lives carefully, enjoying what comes our way, not grasping or taking, not hoarding or guarding, and if we leave our mark, ensuring that it benefits the whole world, not one part at the expense of another.

Each decision we make, each action, makes a difference, but they are one influence amongst millions. So every choice is important, every choice must be informed by the two laws, love God and neighbour. And when we have made our choice, we must not hold onto it, not hold it up as an example of our greatness, but give it to God, trusting that in his time, in his way, each act of love will bring his kingdom closer. And every time we say 'remember me, look what I did', it pushes the kingdom further away.

Then it becomes 'Vanity of vanities'. All is vanity. But when we do what we do for God and for others, trusting in him, there is no vanity, only the eternal life-giving love of God. Amen.