**Ecclesiastes 9:1-12, 11:7-12:7,**

**Sermon at St Paul’s Banbury, 6.02.22**

**Introduction**

*The* *Lancet* is international weekly medical journal, one of the most highly regarded independent journals in the world.

On Monday the journal published a 48-page report of a Commission on dying.[[1]](#footnote-1)

One of the key messages of the report is this:

“Death, dying, and grieving today have become unbalanced. Health care is now the context in which many encounter death and as families and communities have been pushed to the margins, their familiarity and confidence in supporting death, dying, and grieving has diminished. Relationships and networks are being replaced by professionals and protocols.”

The Commission lays out five principles for a new vision of how death and dying could be. One of them is this:

“dying is understood to be a relational and spiritual process rather than simply a physiological event.”

The report says,

“Philosophers and theologians from around the globe have recognised the value that death holds for human life. Death and life are bound together: without death there would be no life. Death allows new ideas and new ways. Death also reminds us of our fragility and sameness: we all die.

Caring for the dying is a gift, as some philosophers and many carers, both lay and professional, have recognised. Much of the value of death is no longer recognised in the modern world, but rediscovering this value can help care at the end of life and enhance living.”

In today’s world, we don’t want to talk about death,

we don’t want to see death,

and we don’t want to be near death.

However, the ironic effect of sterilising ourselves from death, according to *The Lancet* Commission Report, is that we’ve sterilised ourselves from life.

The problem long pre-dates *covid*, but the medical world is beginning to see how masked medics and machines are not a meaningful substitute for the relational and spiritual.

The Teacher (in the book of Ecclesiastes) does not shy away from death.

In fact, he actively considers it. In all sorts of ways

Not because he’s nihilistic and cruel.

Quite the opposite.

His message is: we need to know and embrace our end if we’re to truly live in the present.

It is when we know and embrace our destinies that we find joy and hope in all the seasons of life.

Let’s re-enter his world and join him on his quest for wisdom and meaning.

First,

1. **Know your destiny (9:1-12)**

On Thursday this week, I attended a curate’s training day on maintaining church building and applying for faculties – i.e. how to obtain permission to make changes.

I know what you’re all thinking.

You’re thinking, “what an electrifying life you curates lead!”

In all honesty, it was fascinating and important.

Because I learned a bit more about what can happen to church buildings and how to look after them so that things don’t go badly wrong.

But of course with buildings some things are predictable and other things completely unpredictable.

Similarly, as creatures made by God, the Teacher invites us – God’s people - to reflect on what we do and don’t know about our lives.

Here are some

* 1. ***Things I do know:***
     1. I’m in God’s hands.

Ecclesiastes 9:1:

*So I reflected on all this and concluded that the righteous and the wise and what they do are in God's hands…*

God is sovereign over all things.

He is the Creator, Giver, and Judge.

That means there is no place in the world where he is not present.

There is no circumstance in our lives that he does not rule over.

And just because we’re small and fragile does not mean God is distant and disinterested in us.

He formed us.

He sustains us.

He’s come to us.

He’s redeemed us.

He’s adopted us.

So, those who belong to him in Christ can know for certain that:

* He’s not absent in our grief.
* He’s not lost control over our illness.
* He’s not forgotten you as you grow old.
* He’s still with you on your deathbed.

The Psalmist declares (Psalm 103):

**13**As a father has compassion on his children,  
    so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him;  
**14**for he knows how we are formed,  
    he remembers that we are dust.  
**15**The life of mortals is like grass,  
    they flourish like a flower of the field;  
**16**the wind blows over it and it is gone,  
    and its place remembers it no more.  
**17**But from everlasting to everlasting  
    the Lord’s love is with those who fear him,  
    and his righteousness with their children’s children—  
**18**with those who keep his covenant  
    and remember to obey his precepts.

I’m in God’s hands.

As we’ve reflected on previously, as his child in Christ, I am unceasingly held in his untiring grip.

I also know that

* + 1. I will die

Ecclesiastes 9:2:

*All share a common destiny-the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices and those who do not. As it is with the good man, so with the sinner; as it is with those who take oaths, so with those who are afraid to take them. 3This is the evil in everything that happens under the sun: The same destiny overtakes all.*

*The hearts of men, moreover, are full of evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live, and afterward they join the dead.*

Whoever you are.

Whatever you’re like.

Whatever precautions you’ve taken.

The one thing you and I *cannot* avoid or overcome is that we will die.

With 100% certainty, you and I will go to our graves.

And, yet, as dismal as that sounds on the surface,

* + 1. There is hope in life

Ecclesiastes 9:4:

*4Anyone who is among the living has hope -even a live dog is better off than a dead lion! 5For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even the memory of them is forgotten. 6Their love, their hate and their jealousy have long since vanished; never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun.*

You and I are present at church today because we’re alive.

And the fact that we’re *here* means that we can *hear* this message of hope:

*“…Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21*

*For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. 22For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive”* (1 Cor 15:20-22).

Christ died.

And Christ rose again.

By God’s power, death has been conquered.

And so, for those in Christ, death is *not* the end.

As the Christian television presenter and comedian Stephen Colbert said this week: “death is not defeat.”

For the Christian, death may approach, but it’s lost its sting.

In life and in death, we’re safe in Christ.

It’s also worth remembering Ecclesiastes 9:4 when we think about our friends and family who aren’t yet Christians.

Because where there’s life, there is hope.

Don’t give up praying for them and sharing the love of Christ with them.

Because it’s not yet the end of the story; “anyone among the living has hope.”

There’s hope in life.

Relatedly,

* + 1. There is joy in life

In his interview with Dua Lipa, when she asked him how his faith and comedy connect, Stephen Colbert said that as a Christian he knows that “death is not defeat.” He then went on to say:

“… sadness is like a little bit of an emotional death, but not a defeat if you can find a way to laugh about it.”

In other words, if I can put it like this, at the deepest level, laughter is generated by the resurrection.

The source of our ultimate joy in life, even in the face of our greatest sadnesses and our biggest enemy (death itself), is the fact that Jesus has won.

There is no despair in his victory.

That perspective enables us to live.

That’s the perspective of the Teacher.

He doesn’t name Jesus Christ here.

But the wisdom by which the Teacher speaks is the same as that of Christ, who is the “wisdom and power of God.”

Which means we don’t leave these words behind when Christ comes in the NT.

They actually unveil and flesh out what Jesus means when he says he came to bring life and to bring life to the full.

So, in Christ, (Ecclesiastes 9:7):

*7Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for it is now that God favours what you do. 8Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil. 9Enjoy life with your wife* [or husband]*, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun- all your meaningless days. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labour under the sun. 10Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom.*

In view of all that God has so generously given us in Christ as gift (not for our gain),

we can live and laugh and love to His glory. //

That being said, there are still many uncertainties in life.

As a finite, limited creature, who lives in a fallen world and remains affected by the madness of sin, there are

* 1. ***Things I don’t know:***

For instance, I don’t know

* + 1. How loved I’ll be by others

Ecclesiastes 9:1 again:

*… what they do are in God's hands, but no man knows whether love or hate awaits him.*

I may be in the everlasting grip of God, but that doesn’t mean an easy life.

Those around me are fellow creatures born in Adam, and likewise affected by sin –

that innate desire to grasp onto things at the expense of others.

Left to our own devises, we all tend towards self-gain and self-preservation.

So, we shouldn’t be surprised when people hate each other.

Actually, what’s more extraordinary is when the power of sin is broken, and people truly love one another.

Because that’s a gift that only comes by the grace of God.

I don’t know

* + 1. How successful, powerful, or wealthy I’ll become

It’s fun watching the children play and run-around together after church.

Don’t tell them but I love listening in to their little conversations.

I’ve heard them say things like:

“what games do you like to play?”

“If you were an animal what would you be?”

“Are you a spy or a robber?”

And my personal favourite,

“What’s your favourite number?”

It makes me wonder who or what they’ll become –

What they’ll grow up to do and enjoy.

The truth is, we don’t know.

Because, Ecclesiastes 9:11:

*11I have seen something else under the sun: The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favour to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all.*

We can try to imagine the lives of our children,

Or map out our own careers,

but we don’t know the exact paths we’ll take.

Life is elusive. It’s *hebel*.

I also don’t know

* + 1. How or when I’ll die

In Ecclesiastes 9:9, the teacher describes our very days as *hebel*.

Fleeting, elusive, mysterious.

Some of us may be closer to the end than others, but it’s simply beyond our wisdom to know how many days remain.

I may die in old age.

I may day on the way home from church.

Verse 12:

*…no man knows when his hour will come: As fish are caught in a cruel net, or birds are taken in a snare, so men are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them.*

People can be snatched from us too soon in our eyes.

Which is exceptionally difficult.

This doesn’t minimise the pain of that.

But those in Christ can never be snatched from His hand (John 10:28).

None of those given to Jesus will be lost or driven away.

Know your destiny.

Second, and more briefly, *embrace* your destiny.

1. **Embrace your destiny (11:7-12:8)**

I learned from Steve earlier this week that one of the most influential books in the business and management world is Stephen Convey’s, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*.

Perhaps it’s the secret to how Steve seemingly does two full-time jobs at once.

Second on the list in *the 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* is this: “Start with the End in Mind.”

That’s very much the Teacher’s message here.

Start with the end in mind.

Live with death in view.

Or, in David Gibson’s words, “live life backward.”

He says, “let the grave be your teacher.”

Because when you take the one thing in the future that’s certain – our death – and work backwards, it shapes our values, priorities, goals, and decisions.

Whatever stage in life you’re at.

* 1. ***Young and healthy?***

So, for example, if you’re young and healthy, when it’s tempting to feel free and invincible, getting to grips with your mortality grounds you. It gives you humility.

If you shut yourself off from thoughts of death, or you only think about it in a clinical way, you’ll lose something from the meaning of life.

You’ll be poorer for it.

Living life backwards makes you wiser than your years and cultivates trust in God when things are easier, so that you’re prepared for darker days.

“…they will be many”, says the teacher (Ecclesiastes 11:8).

So,

*Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you say, “I find no pleasure in them”*

* 1. ***Middle-aged and creaking?***

If you’ve hit middle-age, and you’re beginning to creak, it can be tempting to think your best days are behind you.

That can bring with it a certain dissatisfaction, frustration, or even anger.

But living with the end in view prevents you from trying to keep hold of something that’s already gone.

The source of joy is not in youth -

*…youth and vigour are hebel,* the teacher says.

The source of joy is God – the giver of all good gifts.

The fact is, our bodies will fail and minds will fade over time.

Yet He doesn’t!

He doesn’t change.

His grip on you doesn’t weaken.

* 1. ***Older and aging?***

Perhaps you’re older.

Aches and pains are no longer an uncommon occurrence, they’re an everyday reality.

For you it might be tempting to put on a brave face and deny the pains, frustrations, and disappointments you face.

And you wonder who you are these days.

Last week I asked Gordon about the lifespan of a rosebush.

He told me they last about 15 years before they don’t bear as many flowers.

Perhaps you don’t consider yourself the rose bud you once were?

How do you live well as you age? How do you embrace this particular season?

I obviously don’t know what it’s like to be old. Not yet anyway.

What I do know – because the Lord tells us in his Word – is that:

* Each person is valued by God – we’re made in the dignity of his image.
* We are cared for by God – every hair on our heads has been put there by him.
* Our dependency is part of who he made us.

When my children were little, I fed and carried them.

One day, they may have to do the same for me.

And that is an expression of how I am a creature – held in the hand of God.

It is not a burden on others to nurse and care.

It helps them (and us) to enact who we are as dependent human-beings, and to exercise faith.

* Each stage of the arc of human life is an opportunity to receive his grace, and grow in faith and love of Him.
* There is beauty in aging. As Psalm 92 says,

*They still bear fruit in old age; they are ever full of sap and green, to declare that the Lord is upright; he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him.*

* 1. ***When it’s time to die***

And when it’s time to die, as the risen Christ proclaimed to Paul, his grace will [still] be “sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor 12:9).

You can be sure of that because the Lord Jesus has gone before us in death.

He’s prepared the way.

Which means we can actually embrace our destinies…

(Including the hardships, difficulties, disappointments, losses, and griefs along the way – things we wouldn’t choose for ourselves)

… because each of those steps on the road to our final destiny lead us ever closer into us into his everlasting arms.

As we close, listen to these beautiful, real, yet hope-filled words from Ecclesiastes 12:1-7 again:

*1Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, "I find no pleasure in them"-*

*2before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark, and the clouds return after the rain;*

*3when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men stoop, when the grinders cease because they are few,*

*and those looking through the windows grow dim;*

*4when the doors to the street are closed and the sound of grinding fades; when men rise up at the sound of birds, but all*

*their songs grow faint;*

*5when men are afraid of heights and of dangers in the streets; when the almond tree blossoms and the grasshopper drags himself along and desire no longer is stirred.*

*Then man goes to his eternal home and mourners go about the streets.*

*6Remember him-before the silver cord is severed, or the golden bowl is broken;*

*before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, or the wheel broken at the well,*

*7and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.*

Let’s pray…

1. Report of the *Lancet* Commission on the Value of Death: Bringing Death Back into Life (31st January, 2022),

   <https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(21)02314-X/fulltext>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)