

*Ecclesiastes* and Jesus

Today's first reading is from the Old Testament book of *Ecclesiastes*. The author was a cynic with a major case of depression. The book is a search for meaning in life. What can humans do to find satisfaction and happiness? What is worthwhile in life? The search begins with a gloomy outlook – life is boring and as senseless as chasing the wind. This aspect of the book could be summed up in the second verse of the opening chapter: “Nothing makes sense! Everything is nonsense. I have seen it all – nothing makes sense!” Sounds like some of the world-weary philosophers and cynics of today, doesn't it?

*Ecclesiastes* looks at one area of life after another, to see whether meaning and purpose for living can be found. The book decides that humans cannot understand the meaning of life, and that life is too short and unfair. The author looks at all sorts of things – wisdom, work, joy, friendship -- and all are found wanting. And then there is the fact of death; the wise man dies just as the fool does, and each is equally dead. No matter how good life is, it finally ends and all its striving goes for naught. This is depressing, and we might be a bit surprised to find such an attitude in a book of the Bible. But *Ecclesiastes* also shows that some things in life are better than others. For example, it is better to be wise than to be foolish; life goes easier for the wise. And God does intend for people to enjoy his gifts of work, food, drink, friendship, and love for one another.

Another theme is the utter mystery of God. The human person is simply confounded by the activity of God. There is no predicting what God will do and certainly no understanding of God's purposes. So we have verses such as these:

- a. God makes everything happen at the right time. Yet none of us can ever fully understand all he has done, and he puts questions in our minds about the past and the future. (3.11)
- b. I saw everything God does, and I realized that no one can really understand what happens. We may be very wise, but no matter how much we try or how much we claim to know, we cannot understand it all. (8.17)
- c. No one can explain how a baby breathes before it is born. So how can anyone explain what God does? After all, he created everything. (11.5)

*Ecclesiastes* is a book about humility, about acute awareness of our limitations as creatures who stand awestruck before the power and purpose of God, about never knowing the mind and heart of God. It is a rebuke to easy, facile religion, to the TV evangelist sort of statement like “God told me to...” or “God revealed to me that ...” It is also a warning to us. God is indeed our Father, our Daddy, as Jesus taught us to know, but a Daddy who is no fool, a Daddy who is to be respected, an infinite Daddy to whom the finite creature defers, not in cringing appeasement but in clear-eyed evaluation of the reality of existence and life. *Ecclesiastes* can help us with this. Yet *Ecclesiastes* is not the first book I would recommend to someone who inquires about a healthy view of life and spirituality.

I would recommend to such a seeker the book of *Luke* and the person of Jesus that *Luke* shows us. The author of *Luke* lived in just as cynical a society as the writer of *Ecclesiastes*, just as cynical as our own culture. We know from the elegant Greek in which he wrote his books that he was an educated man who would have known the philosophies offered in the intellectual and spiritual marketplace, ancient and contemporary attempts at understanding life. He chose to make sense of his life with a young, executed teacher from the backwater of Galilee, a man who taught wisely, but more importantly a man whose person was so magnetic, so attractive, so founded in reality, that another follower would write that the very person Himself was the truth and the way to truth, the way that one could trust to live out one's own life (John 14.6)

Luke's Jesus tells us that God loves human beings, and that God's love is for everyone, that Jesus is God's Savior for all people. In *Luke* Jesus teaches how precious to God are a lost son, a lost coin, a hated neighbor. In *Luke* Jesus graces the home of a hated tax collector and saves him from his greed and isolation; in *Luke* Jesus, in the midst of His own dying, promises life in paradise to a expiring criminal. In *Luke* Jesus opens Himself up constantly in prayer and embraces the poor and vulnerable. Luke has a tremendous sense of the activity of God and God's willingness to be a part of Her creation, so we hear much talk of God's Spirit, in and with all sorts of people and situations, most especially Jesus.

Perhaps best of all, Luke's Jesus is physically resurrected after his death, as the evangelist shows by telling of Jesus eating a piece of fish. Here is Luke's answer to the problem that ultimately defeated the wisdom of *Ecclesiastes*. In that earlier book, death has the final word, death invalidates all that happens in life, death makes foolish anything that we might think important. All because nothing survives death; it is the final end. Jesus proves him wrong. Jesus survives death, because God loves Him. He tells us that we will survive death, because God loves us. Jesus offers His own resurrected life as a guarantee of His promise and shows He is no mere ghost by eating a humble piece of fish. Jesus still belongs to our world of space and time, though He is no longer restricted by its constraints.

In today's reading from Luke we see Jesus dismiss the preoccupations of *Ecclesiastes*, the preoccupations that we share with that ancient man. We are not to be focused on ourself but rather on God. When we store up everything for ourselves we come to the dead end and despair of *Ecclesiastes*. When we are rich toward God, when we are rich with God, when we can see beyond the necessities of daily life and give ourselves to the grandeur that we were made for, our majesty as images of God, then we enter into the kingdom of the God whose generosity knows no bounds. We are saved, for Jesus trumps *Ecclesiastes*.