

St Nicholas Church

0930 on 12 February 2017

The Pitfalls of Life

Ecclesiastes 8 and 9

We had a Confirmation service on Thursday evening and at the beginning the Bishop reminded us that it was a joyful occasion when the whole of the church celebrated the commitments made by the candidates.

In Luke 15 Jesus says that there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety nine righteous people who do not need to repent. It is great to rejoice, isn't it? This week heaven has been rejoicing with Max on his baptism and with him Eunice, Andrew, and Matthew on their confirmation and we have been able to participate in the rejoicing.

Having a party is great but what about the morning after? The dishwasher may have coped with most of the washing up but there is always something that doesn't go in. There are the leftovers of food and drink: we will never get through all that sherry trifle or all those chicken canapés! And what *did* happen to that book I put away when we tidied up?

We soon come back to earth aren't we? And not long after that the memory begins to fade. We are back to the usual routine. It is like a general election. There's a long build up followed by a late night watching the results come in. Then there is the clearing up and things settle into their normal pattern. The excitement subsides and we start looking for something else to give a bit of variety.

Paul says that the Christian life is like a marathon. Your baptism and confirmation are a something to look forward to and a great experience but they are just the start. But we need to persist as Christians, to learn more about our faith and work out

what it means for us. Satan doesn't like us being effective Christians and seeks to disrupt us.

We have to be prepared for the pitfalls because if we don't things will press in on us. Before long we start to question our faith asking why a bad experience happened or something went wrong. If we do not resist we begin to see faith as the cause of our problems and Jesus no longer seems to be the answer. We drift away from church because we cannot cope. We don't know how to face what life throws at us.

If you have missed the earlier talks in this series, we are studying the book of Ecclesiastes which was written by someone who calls himself the teacher. Our passage this morning prepares us for some of the pitfalls of life. It warns us that challenges and disappointments will come. It offers help on how to cope without becoming distracted by the things of this world. Please turn with me to page 676 in the Bibles.

The first verse of chapter 8 stands on its own as a brief celebration of wisdom which some think should be treated as part of chapter 7. It speaks of a wise man being visibly gracious in his demeanour and whose gentleness is apparent in his face, Father Christmas without the red suit and white beard. True wisdom, which is the knowledge and love of God, gives us a peace that shows on his face.

Attitude to Authority

Verses 2 to 10 deal with our **attitude to authority**. We all have to deal with people in authority throughout our lives, don't we? We start with our parents, there are teachers when we are at school and our employers at work. Authority includes the multitude of things that are regulated by law. We have no alternative but to obey all these instructions.

Sometimes authority is benign. As parents we exercise authority to keep their children safe and help them to be successful as they grow up.

Sometimes authority is inflexible. Maybe when there is a good reason such as the traffic lights at busy road junctions. Sometimes it is arbitrary. Think of the unhelpful shop assistant or enquiry line and occasionally it is unjust. All football supporters can quote examples of how arbitrary and unjust referees can be! Authority can be usurped: think of the driver of the other car who didn't stop at the give way line. There are lots of people around who can frustrate us and make us miserable.

The teacher speaks of the authority of the king who is an absolute monarch with power of instant death over his subjects. Fortunately this is outside our experience but he offers us advice on how to deal with authority.

Verse 5 says take the longer view, however miserable you feel, and comply in the short term. This is the stance of scripture. In the gospels Jesus himself teaches us to deliver to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. In Romans Paul implores slaves to serve their masters as if they were doing it for God. The exception is where our duty to God conflicts with the demands of authority and then we have to stand for Him and accept the consequences. Otherwise, we should be patient.

In 1981 Margaret Thatcher was prime minister and she faced a strike by the coal miners who had stopped the flow of coal to the power stations and threatened to disrupt electricity supplies. It was a dispute she could not win. She accepted the authority of the miners and they won their pay increase. In fact they probably thought they were on to a good thing because coal deliveries actually increased following the strike. Then in 1984 there was another strike but this time Margaret Thatcher was prepared with large stockpiles of fuel at the power stations to withstand a prolonged strike. It was a very bitter dispute but the ransom element of the pay claim was not paid. The authority of the miners had been broken.

The power of those in authority is not limitless because God is in control and we can afford to bide our time. Verses 7 and 8 go on to remind us that nobody knows the future and God alone has power to control it.

So, our attitude to authority should be to **be canny**. If you are going to have a dispute then we should make sure that it is one we can win and be prepared to wait for the right time.

There is a warning for those of us who are in authority in verse 9. We should be good stewards. We should remember that we could be hurt if we abuse or misuse our authority. If we ignore the advice and interests of those under us we may make our position worse for ourselves when things go wrong.

Attitude to Injustice

Let's move on. Verses 10 to 17 focus **on justice** and injustice. The teacher complains verse 10 that the wicked – people who ignore God – receive the same or even better treatment than those who have been faithful throughout their lives. In verse 11 he develops this theme by observing that where the law is not enforced efficiently people will ignore it.

In 2000 the Customs and Excise were investigating a Value Added Tax fraud. For some reason, rather than stopping the fraud as soon as the culprits had been identified, it was allowed to continue and more and more people discovered that they could participate with impunity. By the time action was taken to stop the fraud the Customs and Excise is estimated to have lost about £138 million of tax. Interviewed on television after the case was closed, some of those involved said it was too good to be true they carried on simply because they could!

It seems unfair that some people can persist with wrongdoing without punishment whilst others are penalised when they make a mistake. In verse 14 the teacher observes that the wicked get what the righteous deserve whilst the righteous get what the wicked deserve.

It seems the ultimate injustice when the wicked live a long time and commit many crimes with apparent impunity. The teacher says that there will be a day of reckoning for those who do not fear God. He has his own ways of dealing with injustice and bringing the wicked to account.

This does not offer much comfort in the short term but the message of the teacher: **don't despair**. Don't ignore the evil of injustice but don't become fixated by it. We have all seen people who have pursued matters for decades and whose lives have been destroyed by an injustice. We have also seen people who have been healed because they exercised forgiveness and trusted God. Verse 15 commends a sense of proportion and implores us to enjoy life. We should eat, drink and be glad.

It may seem like it, but this advice is not to lump injustice and like it. We should not allow ourselves to lose the sense of proportion: God's proportion. Vengeance is His prerogative and we should trust Him to exercise it in His own time. We should remember that in Genesis 1 records when God created the world and on the sixth day He saw that it was very good. Do not forget that God created our world to be enjoyed in all its beauty and bounty.

We must be content that we do not know everything. Hard work, persistent endeavour, skill and experience will not reveal the whole truth: that is for God alone. We should be satisfied with what He gives us. We should take pleasure from it and be joyful. It is part of our worship to trust Him with the matters that are His and get on and enjoy his blessings, whatever our circumstances. To be gloomy and miserable is to desecrate God's creation.

Attitude to Death

Let's move on to chapter 9. Verses 1 to 9 teach us that everything that we do and everything that we experience is in God's hands. But, as verse 2 says, we all share the same fate be we righteous or wicked, good or bad, clean or unclean, whether we

offer sacrifices or not. Our hearts are full of evil and in the **end we will all die**. If we are lucky there may be a plaque with our name on it somewhere but that's it!

We all have the same destiny: life is what matters in this world and if you don't have life you are not part of it and soon forgotten. You become just another record of births marriages and deaths. Those of you who watch television programmes on genealogy will know that there are other records of our lives, especially if we come into conflict with authority, but someone needs to be sufficiently interested in us to seek out that information.

The teacher wants us to be realistic. He wants us to face the fact that wicked or righteous we are all going to end up in the same condition. We bring nothing into this world and when we leave others get to enjoy or destroy all that we have accumulated. His antidote for this gloomy prognosis is to encourage us to enjoy the good gifts given to us by God. We are to work with all our might and to dress in bright colours although I am not so sure about anointing my head with oil as suggested in verse 8!

We have to be realistic about what is ultimately going to happen to us and live life to the full until it happens. There is nothing to be gained by worrying about death if we fear God. From time to time we all encounter the process of dying and that can offer a more worrying prospect than the death itself but there is no justification for overwhelmed by it prematurely.

Whilst we are alive we have life and hope and we should get on with the present, look to life in the future and **be cheerful**.

Misfortune

The last pitfall of life that the teacher considers **is misfortune**. Look at verses 11 and 12. It is not always the fastest runner who wins the race: on the day of the event things can and do go wrong which deny him the victory. It is not necessarily the

strongest force that wins the battle. The outcome depends on other factors such as intelligence, communications tactics and even the weather.

Time and chance happen to us all. No matter how well prepared, misfortune will occasionally overcome us. Life is like that. We all have washing machines and boilers that break down and need medical treatment occasionally. That is no reason to be deflected from our faith. Misfortune is a time to look to God and trust in Him. We should be looking out for the way in which He has shown His love and care for us in our troubles.

Misfortune can quickly turn to good fortune. About ten years ago my wife and I ran a youth group based here at St Nicholas and in the summer we would arrange to use the playing field at Almond Hill School for outdoor games. One evening the session had finished and we were clearing up when we were told that one of the girls had fallen and broken her arm. Her mother had just arrived and decided to take her daughter to the Lister. Whilst they were there one of the doctors asked Mum she was being treating her for a glandular condition. It transpired that she had a life threatening condition which had reached a dangerous stage. Her doctor started treatment immediately. Without that injured arm Mum's problem would not have been detected and she could have died.

Paul writes in Romans 8 that all things work together for good to those who love God. We need to keep going until the whole of the plot is revealed!

What about the illustration in verses 14 to 16? *There was once a small city with only a few people in it. A powerful king came against it, surrounded it and built huge siege works against it. There lived in that city a poor man but wise and he saved the city by his wisdom but nobody remembered that poor man. The teacher said "wisdom is better than strength" but the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words are no longer heeded.*

People are fickle. You can be the centre of attention one day and completely ignored the next. That was what happened to the wise man. One moment he was providing vital advice to his fellow citizens but as soon as he was no more use to them he was ignored because he was poor. His poverty did not affect his wisdom but after the siege he was ignored.

The teacher advises us to fear God and **grow in wisdom** because the knowledge of God is worth it.

I can think of another poor man whose wisdom saved his city. He was the wisest man who ever lived. Many people did not appreciate his saving of the city and to this day His words are not heeded by many people. Some even deny that He existed. At the time those in authority treated Him unjustly and used their authority to put Him to death.

His wisdom endures because the man was Jesus and he came to save people to become citizens of the kingdom of God. He promised that He who will return to earth and at the second coming He will be put right all wrongs. His authority will be complete.

Summing Up

So what have we learnt this morning? What attitudes do we need to cultivate if we are going to run the Christian race successfully? We have looked at four realities in these chapters: Authority, injustice, death and misfortune.

Firstly we should be canny in our attitude to authority. Be loyal but **don't let them get you down** and wait for your opportunity. Take your time because neither they nor you know what is going to happen next.

Secondly **don't despair** in the face of injustice or fixate on it but neither should you turn a blind eye to it. More importantly, be joyful.

Thirdly, face the fact one day you are going to die and be joyful for every day that the Lord gives you. **Get on with living in the present** and don't feel guilty when you are doing so.

Fourthly, accept that misfortune will happen because life is unpredictable and neither good fortune nor misfortune can be avoided. **Hold fast to wisdom**, the knowledge of God, even when it seems to be undermined because God will reward those who have faith in Him.

We have the things of this world because God made them for us. We cannot predict what will happen during our lives. We are urged not to waste our energies worrying about it. The teacher wants us to enjoy the good things God gives: have life in all its fullness, enjoy it and don't feel guilty.

Being a Christian is not a passport to a trouble free life without any pain or disappointment. Build a faith that will last in the confident knowledge that God can and must be trusted. Build your faith by facing the facts of life and not deluding yourselves. Life has its adversity but we have wisdom – the knowledge of God – which should not let the pitfalls of life overwhelm us. Wisdom is the mighty pillar that will enable us to withstand the fiercest storms.

Take the advice of the teacher. **Face facts, fear God, and enjoy life**. Claim the promise: have life in Jesus have it more abundantly. In Christ there is world to enjoy. Let us get on with building our faith and enjoying our lives!