

If you ever find yourself euphoric, or just endlessly happy and you find yourself saying, "I've got to stop this. I need a bit of depression in my life." Here's your cure. Read the book of Ecclesiastes in the Bible. That is virtually guaranteed to put you in a depression! Here are some excerpts:

"What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, 'See, this is new'? It has already been, in the ages before us." 1:9-10

Or, "Moreover I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, wickedness was there, and in the place of righteousness, wickedness was there as well." 3:16

"There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people who are treated according to the conduct of the wicked, and there are wicked people treated according to the conduct of the righteous." 9:14

"Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful but time and chance happen to them all."

9:11

And finally, "I gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labors under the sun, because sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and great evil. What do mortals get for all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest." 2:20-23

Of course the whole depressing work is in your Bibles. We have a phrase today that pretty much sums up Ecclesiastes: No good deed goes unpunished.

The truly sad thing about Ecclesiastes is not that its author is undoubtedly suffering from depression, it is that the words are too often borne out in reality. Life isn't fair. The sooner we accept this fact the sooner we reach true maturity.

As we are here on All Saints Sunday we reflect about living and dying, and what is the point of life, and what are we living for? In ages past church leaders and political leaders taught the poor peasants under them that their role in life was to

suffer and toil all day every day. They were to suffer now because God would reward their suffering in the future with eternal life. If they did not suffer now God would punish them with eternal damnation. If you've ever studied church architecture of centuries past and a lot of artwork of the period you discover how images of heaven and hell were everywhere. Illiterate peasants were scared into obedience and submission by the threat of hell.

Of course in the meantime the leaders - in both church and state - were living quite high off the hog from the labors of the peasant classes. The writer of Ecclesiastes would say, "Vanity of vanities. This is vanity."

Let's not be so simple or foolish to accept such a view of life. God does not work on a - suffer now, be rewarded later - basis. Too many Christians teach and believe that this life is a test to see if a person is worthy enough for God's grace and to go to heaven. Nothing could be farther from the truth. While many can point to various verses in the Bible and claim it to be God's will, these various verses don't fit the bigger theme of biblical teaching.

So then, should we take the opposite view of things? Should we, "eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow you shall die?" Not surprisingly Ecclesiastes has a depressing answer to this sort of happiness too. "I made great works; I built houses and planted vineyards for myself; I made myself gardens and parks... I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasures of kings, I got singers, both men and women, and delights of the flesh, and many concubines... Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them... Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and chasing after wind." 2:4-11

Jesus' teachings in our gospel reading give us guidance about how to live and how to avoid having all of what we do be vanity. These words are probably familiar to you. They are often called "The Beatitudes." They predict a reversal of fortune for the poor and rich alike. We who are undeniably among the rich and privileged do not like these verses. They make us feel guilty or uneasy, and indeed they should. Difficult as life is for a truly poor and desperate people they have one big advantage over us. They cannot fool themselves into thinking they have the power to get themselves what they need.

They don't have resources to leverage for their necessities. They don't have friends in high places to swing deals for them. They don't have social networks to make them feel good about themselves and give them the message that they are good and likable.

In other words, they turn to God because they have to turn to God. There are no options for a substitute. It is this turning to God that both brings about blessings and also sets our lives on a path that is worthwhile.

In the second part of our gospel reading Jesus give other advice, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt."

To some this sounds like Jesus is teaching his followers to be doormats. But if you know the world of Jesus' day this was solid teaching for a poor powerless person to stand up for their dignity in the face of a powerful oppressor. I've preached

about that before and I'm not going to go into that now. I do want to focus on what is behind what Jesus is saying.

We have lots of potential at our disposal: We have money. We have possessions. We have friends. If we are on our death beds what do we want to look back upon so that all of that is not vanity but a blessing and something for rejoicing?

Underneath Jesus teachings in the gospel is this truth: God is up to something. It is impossible for us to know exactly what or how. Our limited brains can't grasp it. But we do know God is doing something, and we've been invited to be a part of it. We also know that God has given us money, possessions, and friends. We can foolishly turn to these things for safety and support or we can trust in God and recognize that these things are powerful tools that have been placed in our hands.

How do we use these tools so that our lives are not vanity? Jesus' answer is simple, and let's not make it complex. *Treat everyone as a neighbor.* This is the very character of God. God's love is indiscriminate.

On All Saints Sunday, whether we want to imagine being on our death beads and reflecting back on our lives, or just going to bed at night and reflecting back on the day, we can say to the author of Ecclesiastes. "No, not all is vanity. You are missing something. There are things that are worthwhile, and I have done them. Sometimes I won. Sometimes I lost. Sometimes I got hurt and sometimes I got healed. And sometimes I messed up and was forgiven, but I tried again. I have invested who I am in God's work, and I know God will bring it to fruition."

Amen