

Ecclesiastes 1

Why I wake up early

Tim Anderson 13/7/17

We're beginning a new sermon series today.

It's going to be a little disjointed.

We're doing a couple of weeks,

and then we will break for a month

while we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the reformation.

And then our family is on holidays for three weeks.

But we're making a start.

What are we starting?

We're going to be looking at Ecclesiastes.

Now some of you might not be too familiar with Ecclesiastes.

I'm guessing it doesn't make the curriculum for Trinity Kids.

It's a difficult book.

Let's not pretend.

I've read it through lots of times over the years.

And some bits are hard to get your head around.

At times it can feel a bit depressing.

If you are looking for God's word to give you a spiritual lift,
you might find Ecclesiastes confusing.

But I'm convinced that God put all the Bible in for our benefit.

Paul Barker was preaching at Phil Hurwood's induction
at Somerville last week.

And he came to 2 Timothy 3:16,

"All Scripture is breathed out by God
and useful for teaching, correcting,
rebuking and training in righteousness."

And he said to us,

"Of course Paul was primarily talking to Timothy about the OT.

Those were the Scriptures that his Mum and his Grandma taught him.

And we need to be able to preach Jesus from all of them."

So here's my challenge.

Preach Jesus to you from Ecclesiastes.

So let's take up the challenge.

Meaningless! Meaningless!
says the teacher.
Utterly meaningless!
Everything is meaningless.

Well there's a happy start for you.
These are the words of King Solomon,
or someone speaking for him.
Let's say it was Solomon.
He was a man who had a great position in the world.
He had power and prestige.
He had fame and fortune.
He had more of everything than you or I could ever dream of.
He was specifically blessed by God with wisdom,
to be the wisest man on earth.
And what is his conclusion?
Everything is meaningless.
Utterly meaningless!

Even the word translated meaningless is a bit meaningless.
It's very hard to come to grips with exactly what it means.
The King James version translated it vanity.
Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher.
Vanity of vanities.
All is vanity.
Sometimes the word can mean frustrating.
Sometimes it means like the steam you breathe out on a cold morning.
Try to grab it in your hands and it's not there.
Who is going to say life is not like that sometimes?
Ever planted some seedlings to have them eaten by snails?
Ever washed and ironed some clothing
to have some child make them dirty again in two seconds?
There's a lot about life that can look a bit like a mouse in a treadmill.
The mouse runs and runs,
and the treadmill spins,
and the mouse gets nowhere.

Solomon is going to talk about many aspects of life that tend to go this way.

But he starts off focused on our work.

Verse 3,

"What do people gain from all their labours at which they toil under the sun?"

This is a rhetorical question, right?

He's not expecting the answer,

a generous pay packet,

with a nice car thrown in at the company's expense

and a great superannuation scheme so you can enjoy your retirement.

Solomon's expected answer is "Nothing."

Or at best, "Not very much."

Is that because in his day they didn't have generous pay packets, with nice cars thrown in at the company's expense?

Not at all.

Remember who he was.

Here was a man who was richly rewarded for his work.

He had more than anyone in the ancient world.

His point is that working with goal

that the one who dies

with the most expensive food in their tummy wins,

is a meaningless existence.

At the end of the day,

you can't take it with you.

So if you slog your guts out to get it,

then you are not much different from the mouse on the treadmill.

"Utterly meaningless!

Everything is meaningless."

There are two things about work

that Solomon finds particularly meaningless.

The first is that it's not possible to do anything new.

The second is that everything you do gets forgotten.

Lets think about nothing being new.

Solomon says,
"All things are wearisome,
more than one can say.
The eye never has enough of seeing,
nor the ear of hearing.
What has been will be again,
what has been done will be done again;
there is nothing new under the sun.
Is there anything of which one can say,
"Look! This is something new"?
It was here already long ago;
it was here before our time."

Now people today might have trouble accepting Solomon's words.
Maybe it was hard in 950BC to do something new.
But look at the internet!
Look at the jumbo jet!
We just put a probe on Mars last year.
The amount of newness around the place is so overwhelming,
I'm having trouble coping.
But is it really that new.
Think about the internet.
What's it used for?
Sending messages.
Solomon sent messages.
He had people to carry them for him.
Shopping.
Solomon did shopping.
If he wanted Hiram King of Tyre
to send him some cedar trees so he could build a temple,
well he paid him some gold and got the cedar.
Sexual gratification.
Solomon knew about that too.
He had 700 wives and 300 concubines.
The internet does it faster.
But there's nothing really new about what it does.

And a jumbo jet is just a fast way of doing what a bus does.
And a bus is a fast way of doing what a horse drawn carriage does.
And Solomon had plenty of horses and chariots.
Nothing new about a jumbo jet - looked at the right way.
And for most of us our work is very similar to 950BC.
Do you spend time washing clothes?
They did too.
Do you spend time cooking?
They did too.
Maybe you are a teacher.
They had teachers.
Maybe you are an electrician -
they had trades people.

Solomon says,
at the end of the day,
what you do is what people have always been doing.
And we don't seem to get anywhere.
Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un
have been getting hairy chested this week.
Do you think leaders engaged in a bit of
my ego is bigger than yours in 950BC?
Do you think that it was the little people who would suffer
if one guy tried to prove he was better than the other guy in 950 BC?
Yes. Nothing has changed.
There is nothing new under the sun.
These guys now have nukes to prove how tough they are.
But it's all about little people getting hurt,
the same as when they had arrows and swords.

Two depressing things about work.
Nothing is new.
And everything you do gets forgotten.
What did your great grandfather on your mother's side do for a job?
Do you know?
What did he achieve in his work?

Anything lasting?

What is he remembered for?

Anything at all?

Most people would like to be remembered.

That's why we put headstones on graves.

They even have headstones on graves these days
that you can scan something with your phone
and the person can talk to you and show you photos of their life.

Wonderful technology.

But I don't know too many people
who can be bothered wandering around cemeteries
listening to the stories of the dead.

What are you going to be remembered for
once your grand children are dead?

Once the people who had personal contact with you
have also died,

will anyone remember you?

Will they celebrate something you have done?

I know that Shakespeare exists.

He is remembered.

But guys like him are the exception that proves the rule.

And most of them are remembered for bad things they did.

For every Shakespeare, there are two Hitlers or Pol Pots.

Pretty meaningless having your work remembered to be reviled.

What does Solomon say in verse 11?

"No one remembers the former generations,
and even those yet to come
will not be remembered by those who follow them."

It's a pretty bleak picture.

We can't achieve anything new.

And what we do achieve won't be remembered.

Now I promised you at the start of the sermon,
that this would be a Christian sermon.

We preach Christ from all of the Scriptures.

But nothing I've said so far is specifically Christian.

A good Jew could read Ecclesiastes
and preach what Solomon discovered about the futility of work.
How does Jesus change things?
Because we know that Jesus changes everything.

Well everything that Solomon said is true -
about us.

But nothing Solomon said is true about Jesus.

The futility of our human existence comes from the fall.

And Jesus turns the fall upside down.

Jesus worked.

In John's gospel Jesus said,

"My food is to do the will of him who sent me
and to finish his work."

Jesus' work is to do the will of his heavenly Father.

It's Jesus' work that demonstrates that the Father has sent him.

This is Jn 5:36,

"The works that the Father has given me to finish,
the very works I am doing -
testify that the Father has sent me."

But can Jesus achieve something new with his work?

Can Jesus achieve something that no one else before him has achieved?

Yes he can.

He turns the meaninglessness of work upside down.

Jesus work undid the curse of death and sin.

Before Jesus' did his work,

we were destined to die.

Now because of Jesus' work,

those whose faith is in him will have eternal life.

No one else could do the work of redeeming sinful humanity.

No one else could restore the relationship between God and man.

What Solomon observed about work -

that it is futile, you can't achieve anything new,

is not true of Jesus' work.

His work is new.

He achieved something unique.

Solomon also observed that our work is not remembered.
In a few generations time,
all the things you did will be forgotten.
But again that's not true of Jesus' work.
At the Last Supper, Jesus said,
"Do this in memory of me."
And today we will.
We will share bread and wine in memory of Jesus' work on the cross.
And not just us.
People all over the world will remember Jesus.
Our work is forgotten.
But Jesus' work is remembered.
His work will never be forgotten.
People will be singing his praises for eternity.
Even in heaven,
Jesus' work will be remembered.
Jesus rose from the dead.
But the reminder of his work was still on his resurrection body.
The nail marks were in his hands.
In the book of Revelation,
Jesus is pictured standing at the centre of the throne in heaven.
And how is he pictured?
He's looking like a lamb that had been slain.
His work is remembered even in heaven.

Jesus' work is new and Jesus' work is remembered.
That's nice for Jesus.
But what about our work?
How can we achieve something worth remembering?
The apostle Paul tells the Corinthians,
"Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord,
because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain."
Labour in the Lord is not meaningless.
Why so?
Because our labour in the Lord gets attached to Jesus' work.
And it is remembered.

It is not forgotten.

Remembered and rewarded.

In Mt 10:42, Jesus says,

"If anyone gives even a cup of cold water
to one of these little ones who is my disciple,
truly I tell you,
that person will certainly not lose their reward."

You don't have to do amazing things
like Shakespeare to be remembered.

You need to do something modest in the name of Jesus.

God will not forget that.

He will reward it.

If you sort donations for the op shop to serve Jesus
that will be remembered.

If you write an email to encourage Luke and Jane,
that will be remembered.

If you invited a friend to come and see the drama this morning,
that will be remembered even if they said No.

Meaningless, Meaningless,
everything is meaningless.

You can be chief executive of BHP,
and unless your labour is in the Lord,
it will be meaningless.

Your great great grandchildren won't even know what your job was.

Everything is meaningless,

Until Jesus turns everything upside down.

And now our work has purpose.

Praise God!