

Ecclesiastes 2
The Hollow House of Hedonism
Tim Anderson 20/7/17

People tells me,
"fast cars and flashy properties,
lots of alcohol and beautiful women,
retiring early and living a non stop holiday,
these things will never satisfy you.
You can give yourself all the pleasure you want.
But the more you chase after pleasure,
the more it eludes you.
It's called the pleasure paradox.
True pleasure is not found by those who chase it.
Instead it is found by those live for a greater cause,
and they find pleasure as a by product along the way."
You must have heard that too.
If you haven't you haven't been sitting in church long enough.
You know what,
I've heard it a hundred times.
I've lived like it's true.
It conforms to the evidence of my eyes.
How many Hollywood stars with every pleasure laid on
are totally miserable?
And yet people in humble circumstances who live for others -
they seem very happy.
I think of Mike and Karen the couple
who lead the team that do the breakfast down at the high school.
They're not living the high life.
There's plenty of health issues that would get other people down.
But they appear very contented.
They're an advertisement for the pleasure paradox.
But you know what?
Even though I know it's true.
When I hear it,
something inside of me says,

"I know that chasing pleasure doesn't bring true pleasure.
It brings a hollow empty shell of a life.
But I wouldn't mind finding that out for myself -
just a bit.

Purely for verification purposes you understand."

What is that?

Why is that voice there in my head?

The evidence is obvious and indisputable,
why is it so hard to believe?

Well Solomon must have had the need to prove it to himself.
And he had the wherewithal to give testing it out a really good go.
In verse 3 he starts off down the pub.

"I tried cheering myself with wine."

They are sorry figures those guys who live down the pub.

They had free parking on the grass at a pub in Railton.

We put our camper trailer there while we explored the locality.

But when we returned at the end of the day,

there were the sorry faces of the same blokes lined up at the bar.

In verse 4, Solomon moves from the pub to the garden.

This seems to be a step up.

He seems to be making something of enduring beauty.

"I built houses for myself and planted vineyards,

I made gardens and parks

and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them.

I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees."

I don't mind planting a fruit tree or two myself.

Indeed I have plans to plant some.

Solomon it seems was recreating the garden of Eden,

without the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Something well beyond what you and I could hope for.

In verse 7, Solomon moves from the garden to the bank.

He's amassed himself a fortune.

He's got a town of slaves.

Minions if you've seen Despicable Me.
He's got a farm with herds and flocks bigger than you've seen.
Have you heard about the farmer in the Northern Territory
who had a visit from a farmer from Texas?
Took him up in his helicopter to have a look at his cattle.
They don't use motorbikes to muster the cattle up there.
Showed the Texan a huge herd.
The Texan said,
"Nah we got 'em bigger in Texas."
He flew over the Victoria River in full flood.
It was 3 km wide.
He said,
"Gosh the creek in back paddock is flowing alright this year."
The Texan said,
"Nah we got 'em bigger in Texas."
So he landed the chopper and took him for a walk around.
And a mob of roos comes hopping past.
And the Farmer says,
"Crikey. The fleas are big this year."
Solomon is that farmer.
He's got everything bigger than Texas.
And plenty stashed away too.
"I amassed silver and gold for myself,
and the treasure of kings and provinces.
1 Kings 10 tells that in one year Solomon acquired 666 talents of gold.
Which means nothing until you put it in currency we understand.
That's 23 tonnes.
Or about \$1.2B worth.

So he's testing out pleasure in the pub and then the garden
and then through amassing stuff, finally he moves to the bedroom.
Verse 8, "I acquired male and female singers,
and a harem as well -
the delights of a man's heart."
I think I mentioned last week -
700 wives and 300 concubines.

Easy to say.
But imagine it.
You couldn't even remember all their names.
And don't make the mistake of thinking
this was all about clever political alliances for the king.
OK maybe the 700 wives was largely about politics.
But you don't take concubines for political reasons.
It's purely and simply about the sex.
Or should I say impurely and simply about the sex.

So Solomon has moved from the Pub to the Garden
to the Bank to the Bedroom.
And what does he conclude about it all?
"I denied myself nothing my eyes desired.
I refused my heart no pleasure."
So he could have whatever he wanted.
And he did.
And you expect him to say it was meaningless straight away.
But he doesn't.
He says,
"My heart took delight in all my labour,
and this was the reward for all my toil."
There was actually genuine reward for his hard work.
Maybe not the carousing down the pub.
Certainly no genuine rewards for his immorality in taking concubines.
But for his building parks and gardens,
at the end of the day,
he could look at the results of his hard work
and take satisfaction in them.
Because friends, we were created in the image of a Creator God.
And when we create we will gain satisfaction in doing the stuff
that comes from doing what our heavenly Father does.
But Solomon doesn't linger there.
Straight after saying that, he's back to the futility of it all.

"Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done

and what I had toiled to achieve,
everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind;
nothing was gained under the sun."

Why?

Why if he could take delight in fruits of his labour,
why is it all meaningless, a chasing after the wind?

Well Solomon outlines two problems.

The first is the problem of inheritance.

Have you ever thought about

who is going to get all your stuff when you die?

Lots of people spend a fair bit of time thinking these things over.

And the more stuff they have,

the more it becomes an important question for them.

But you know what.

Once you are dead, there's nothing you can do about it.

If someone uses my good Wusthof knives

cuts with them on a hard surface and blunts them,

and doesn't know to use a sharpening iron.

They'll be blunt in a minute flat and they'll probably say,

"These knives are no good," and chuck them out.

If someone chops up my hand made chessboard for kindling,

there will be nothing I can do about it.

Solomon says,

"I hated all the things I had toiled for under the Sun,

because I must leave them to the one who comes after me.

And who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish?

Yet they will have control over all the fruit of my toil,

into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun."

And so what's the point?

What's the point of slogging your guts out,

when somebody else is going to get it?

Why did I lovingly care for the fruit trees

I planted in the Healesville vicarage?

The next guy might not even bother pruning them.

That's the first problem. The problem of inheritance.

The second problem is the problem of worry.

Solomon says,

"My heart began to despair over all my toilsome labour ...

What do people get for all the toil and *anxious* striving,
with which they labour under the sun?

All their days their work is grief and pain,
even at night their minds do not rest.

This too is meaningless."

As if there wasn't enough problems with the work itself,
once you realise you can control who gets it when you die,
then you lay awake at night worrying about who is going to get it.
So as well as not being able to control
what happens to your stuff after you die,
you have the ulcers and migraines now
that are spawned by that realisation.

So what do we as Christians do with that cheery analysis of life?

Solomon gives us some starting points.

Verse 24.

"A person can do nothing better
than eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil.

This, I see, is from the hand of God,
for without him,
who can eat and find enjoyment?"

In other words,

it doesn't matter so much what your work is.

Don't spend your energy
stressing about what will happen to it after you die.

Just enjoy your work now.

If you're working in a cafe,
then enjoy spending time chatting to the customers.

If you're working in a library,
enjoy being surrounded by a wealth of knowledge.

If you're a plumber,
well you might not enjoy

clearing out the blockages leading to someone's loo,
but you can still enjoy serving that person
and saving them from having to do it for themselves.
We have to learn to find satisfaction in the little blessings of life.
As Solomon says,
"This is from the hand of God."
There's no point living life
weighed down by the things you can't control,
like what happens to your stuff after you die.
But take pleasure in the small gifts of God.
When you wake up in the morning,
that's a gift to thank God for.
If there's food on the table,
that's a blessing too.
If someone wants you to do some work,
then you are wanted.
That's a blessing.
If you are free to come here this morning,
well many people in the world don't have that freedom,
so thank God for that too.
What you'll find is that thanking God for his goodness helps you.
It's good to thank God for his many blessings,
but you will feel better about the world,
when you cultivate an attitude of gratitude.
Instead of feeling like Solomon who said,
"I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun."
You'll be able to appreciate what God has given to you -
and just enjoy life.
And that surely is a blessing.

But there's also something about trusting God to work things out
so that they contribute towards his good purposes.
Solomon says,
"To the person who pleases him,
God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness,
but to the sinner,

he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth,
to hand it over to the one who pleases God.
You can trust God with your inheritance.
One of the things that comforts me
about my fruit trees in the Healesville vicarage,
is that I trust God to put one of his good servants in to live in that house.
And I trust God to put that fruit
into the hands of someone who loves and serves Jesus.
And that brings joy to my heart.
God will work things out to bless his faithful people.
And what a privilege to be a part of that blessing.

But really I'm more protective of the pulpit than the fruit trees.
I don't want someone who doesn't believe the Scriptures
to get up and preach to the church I pastored for twelve years.
But you know I can trust God.
He works things out for the benefit of his people.
That includes the good folk at St John's in Healesville.
God has good plans for them.
He will give them blessings they haven't even worked for.
I don't have to lay awake at night.

And even if someone goes in as the minister there
who I wouldn't have chosen.
That may be because my assessment of what is needed is flawed.
Or it may be because God's ways of blessing his people and his church
have a few more twists and turns in them
than I had counted on.
But in any case, we can rest on the promises of God.
Whether it's Paul's promise in the Book of Romans,
"We know that in all things God works
for the good of those who love him,
who have been called according to his purpose."
Or Solomon's promise here,
"To the person who pleases him,
God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness,

but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth, to hand it over to the one who pleases God."

In any case,
we can rest on the promises of God.

I was talking to a woman who is an atheist this week.

We were talking about a prayer that began,
"You O Lord are full of compassion and mercy."

And she said to me,

"Well that's OK for you, isn't it?

But he's going to send me to hell.

Not much compassion and mercy there."

What I should have said was,

"There's compassion and mercy there for you if you ask him for it.

And if you don't ask,

you can't blame him for not giving it."

It's a bit like that with what Solomon says.

"To the sinner God gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God."

It sounds a bit rough on the sinner.

But in the end,

the sinner makes the choice to reject God.

If the sinner wanted the part of the promise that says,

"To the person who pleases him,

God gives wisdom and knowledge and happiness,"

well they could access that part of the promise.

They just need to come before God

and ask for his compassion and mercy,

and in so doing be a person who pleases God.

Well let me summarise.

If you try chasing pleasure, you are not going to find it.

Chasing pleasure makes pleasure run away.

You can't control what happens to stuff after you die.

So don't even bother worrying about it.

Instead enjoy what you are doing.
Rejoice in the small blessings.
These come from the hand of God.
And rest in the promises of God.
That includes wisdom and knowledge and happiness
for those who please God.
So instead of stressing about the future,
let's leave it in God's capable hands and trust him.