

Ecclesiastes 11:1-12:8  
Before the evil days come  
*Tim Anderson 3/12/17*

The golden years have come at last.  
I cannot see.  
I cannot pee.  
I cannot chew.  
I cannot hmm perhaps we can't have that line in church.  
My memory shrinks.  
My hearing stinks.  
No sense of smell.  
I look like hell.  
My body is drooping.  
I have trouble pooping.  
The golden years have come at last.  
The golden years can kiss my ....  
Well we won't say the last bit in church either.

My grandfather wrote that poem out  
in his wobbly old person's handwriting,  
and he stuck it on his wall.  
He didn't author the poem.  
He just approved of the sentiment and wanted to display it.  
Of course the idea is not original.  
Solomon got there a long time ago.  
Because that's exactly the sentiment of Ecclesiastes 12:1-7.

Remember your creator in the days of your youth,  
before the days of trouble come  
and the years approach when you will say,  
"I find no pleasure in them".  
It's a very sad thing when you are talking to older people,  
and they say to you,  
'There's nothing left in life that I can take pleasure in.  
All the things I used to enjoy,

I can't do any more.'  
You need to remember your creator,  
'before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark.'  
Many times over the last few weeks,  
we've read Solomon talking about the various things  
that happen under the Sun.  
But now the Sun is going dark.  
In the prophets,  
it talks about the Sun going dark  
"on the great and dreadful day of the Lord".  
It's a picture of God's judgement on the world.  
We know that the Sun went dark for three hours  
as Jesus hung on the cross.  
It was a picture of God's judgement falling on him.  
But here the sun going dark is a picture of your death.  
At the end of the world, creation is unmade,  
so at the end of human life, we are unmade.  
Our world goes dark.  
And Solomon describes the process of how we get there.  
In verse 3 'the keepers of the house tremble'.  
The hands that were once so strong  
that they looked after everything in the house.  
Those hands get the shakes.  
Like my grandfather's hands that wrote out the poem.  
'The strong men stoop.'  
The men that once walked proud and upright are bent over.  
'The grinders cease because they are few.'  
Remember back then, they didn't have tooth brushes or dentists.  
Gradually folks lost their teeth  
until they couldn't grind their food any more.  
'Those looking through the windows grow dim.'  
The picture is of your eyes as windows  
through which you view the world.  
And gradually as your eyesight fails,  
it's as though the windows grow dim.  
And it's not just your eyes that stop working.

"When the doors to the street are closed  
and the sound of grinding fades."  
That is, you are going deaf.  
You can't hear what's happening out on the street.  
You can't even hear yourself chew your food.  
And the frustrating thing is,  
even though you can't hear the things you want to hear.  
"When people rise up at the sound of birds."  
That is, when you don't want to hear it,  
it wakes you up at the crack of dawn  
because you have trouble sleeping these days.  
And here's one for the church goers.  
I've had a number of ladies complain to me about this one.  
'All the songs grow faint.'  
In other words, you can't sing like you used to.  
A great frustration for those who love praising God in song.

And then there are things  
that once upon a time would not have worried you  
now make you afraid.  
You move from as a young person  
being the youths roaming the streets at night  
to in middle age ignoring the youths roaming the streets at night  
to in old age feeling quite vulnerable  
in the presence of youths roaming the streets at night.  
"People are afraid of heights  
and of dangers in the streets."  
Then your hair turns snow white  
which is captured by quite a beautiful picture.  
"The almond tree blossoms."  
and then you lose your mobility and struggle to get around  
which is captured by the not quite so beautiful picture of  
"the grasshopper drags itself along".

You find that foods that once delighted your taste buds,  
you just don't have an appetite for them anymore.

"And desire is no longer stirred."  
Or is he talking just about food?  
Maybe not.

And after all this talk about the degeneration of old age,  
Solomon comes to the funeral.  
"People go to their eternal home,  
and mourners go about the streets."

Well Solomon expresses the frustration of old age rather well.  
But you don't need to have faith in the one true God to do that.  
It's just good observation about life.  
Where faith comes into play  
is in what we do with the observation about life.  
We don't like to think about it much  
until it stares us in the face and we can't avoid it,  
but yes it is true.  
Old age has a range of frustrations.  
But what do we do with that?

The key word is repeated three times at the start of chapter 12.  
Verse 1, "Before the days of trouble come"  
Verse 2, "Before the sun grows dark."  
Verse 6, "Before the silver cord is severed."  
If you don't realise the frustrations of old age until they come upon you,  
then there's not much you can do about it.  
But if through careful observation,  
or by reading your grandfather's poems on the wall,  
or by reading Ecclesiastes,  
you come to recognise the this truth in advance,  
then you can take appropriate action.  
But what is the appropriate action?  
Verse 1, "Remember your creator  
in the days of your youth."  
Verse 6, "Remember him - before the silver cord is severed."  
Remember your Creator now.

That's the message of the frustrations of aging.  
Life is fleeting.  
So do the important things now.  
Remember your creator.  
Remember him while you still can.  
Now some of us, might think we are off the hook.  
We aren't young anymore,  
so the opportunity has passed us by.  
"Better tell the girls at Trinity Girls about that one,  
because I've got a serious dose of middle age."  
But actually, when Solomon says youth,  
he simply means  
before the things he's about to describe creep up on you.  
If the keepers of the house aren't trembling yet,  
If your dentist has not succeed in pulling out all your grinders yet,  
If you can still sleep at night  
and your almond tree hasn't blossomed silvery white yet,  
then make sure you remember your creator.  
A good look at what's coming in the future  
is a reminder to remember him now.  
Put simply, in the future you may not be able to do all that you can now,  
so do it now.  
Remember your creator now.

But how do we remember our creator?  
That's where we have to look back at the first part of the passage.  
Remember the two great commandments of the Lord Jesus.  
Love the Lord your God with all you heart soul mind and strength.  
Love your neighbour as yourself.  
Well one way to remember our creator  
is to love our neighbours as ourselves.  
Chapter 11:1-6 gives us some guidelines for that.  
Here's the one sentence summary.  
"Despite all the uncertainty of life,  
work hard so that you can serve others."  
Three times in these verses,

we hear the phrase,  
"You do not know".  
Life is particularly uncertain.  
None of us know what tomorrow will bring.  
So if you want to be able to serve others,  
Solomon's advice is,  
don't put all your eggs in one basket.  
In those days the profit to be made  
by sending ships across the sea was very high.  
Otherwise people couldn't get the goods  
that were not made in their land.  
But the risks of sending cargo across the sea was also great.  
Ships foundered.  
So what is Solomon's advice?  
Withdraw from commerce altogether?  
No. Invest in 7 or 8 ventures.  
Then there's a good chance you will have something to share.

Do you have to wait for an ideal time before commencing a venture?  
Solomon's advice is,  
"Whoever watches the wind will not plant;  
whoever looks at the clouds will not reap."  
The point is not to dissuade you from appropriate caution.  
By all means pack a rain coat.  
But many times appropriate caution is given as an excuse for inaction.  
You get that in the church all the time.  
It's never quite the right time for evangelism,  
it's never quite the right time for a church plant,  
it's never quite the right time for a building project,  
unless of course a fire forces it on you.  
We can always think of things that may go wrong.  
But nothing is surer than this,  
if you attempt nothing,  
you will achieve nothing.

The Anglican church is beset by this kind of risk averse thinking.

The folk down at Connect Church in Bray Street  
with their parent church in Frankston  
are planning a church plant in Clyde next year.  
The Anglican Diocese of Melbourne has been talking  
about how it would be a good idea for a decade.  
In our own church we need to avoid this trap.  
If people have an idea about how they would like to serve Jesus,  
we need to give them permission.  
"You don't know the path of the wind,  
or how the body is formed in the mother's womb,  
so you cannot understand the work of God,  
the maker of all things."  
So despite the fact that we might think we know what's what,  
actually we know far less than we think we do,  
so give people a go.  
If it falls flat, help them dust themselves off,  
if it works, praise God.

I was talking with the pastor  
of a small church in Glen Waverly on Wednesday.  
Last year he engaged in an evangelistic program.  
Five families joined his church.  
I was interested to find out when I saw him,  
how many stuck around.  
He told me that 12 months later, three had left, two remained.  
That kind of thing can really sap your enthusiasm.  
I wanted to encourage him, so I said,  
"There are two families who are in your church now,  
who wouldn't be in the kingdom of God  
if you hadn't done the evangelistic program."  
We've got to try lots of stuff,  
because we don't know in advance what God will bless.

There are lots of things we don't know.  
But something things we do know.  
"You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,

that though he was rich,  
yet for your sakes he became poor,  
so that you by his poverty might become rich."  
If you try something for Jesus,  
you don't know how it's going to turn out.  
But you do know what Jesus did for you.  
And that's all the motivation we need to give it a go.

"Sow your seeds in the morning,  
and at evening let your hands not be idle,  
for you do not know which will succeed,  
whether this or that,  
or whether both will do equally well."  
It applies to our financial endeavours.  
Working hard and trying various things,  
so as to have resources to put to work for the kingdom.  
It also applies to our sowing of gospel seeds.  
Give it a go.  
That's one way to remember your creator.  
There are no prizes for burying your talent in the ground.

That's one way to remember your creator.  
Here's another.  
This is 11:7-10.  
I'm going to call this section 'enjoy responsibly'.  
If you are a wine drinker,  
you might have seen this written on bottles of wine.  
The message is that this product is designed to be enjoyed,  
but it has the potential for being abused.  
And life is like that.  
It's a gift from God to be enjoyed.  
But it must be enjoyed responsibly.  
A life abused is no fun for anyone.

Solomon is very positive about life.  
He says, "Get out there and enjoy it."



In verse 8,

"However many years anyone may live,  
let them enjoy them all."

In verse 9,

"You who are young, be happy while you are young,  
and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth.  
Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see ..."  
Remember that Solomon is not talking to teenagers here.  
The young are those young enough to enjoy life.  
If you are young enough to enjoy life,  
then do so.

Enjoy it!

And yet Solomon also has some words of warning in the same place.

In verse 8,

"However many years anyone may live,  
let them enjoy them all.  
But let them remember the days of darkness,  
for there will be many.  
Everything to come is meaningless."

In other words,

there is lots of frustration and difficulty over the horizon,  
so enjoy the present.

In verse 9,

"You who are young, be happy while you are young,  
and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth.  
Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see,  
but know that for all these things  
God will bring you into judgement."

In other words,

Do what your heart desires,  
but make sure that your heart desires what God desires.  
Chasing after happiness in ways that are not what God desires  
will not bring happiness  
because happiness comes  
from living the way your creator has designed you to.  
Chasing after happiness the wrong way

will bring frustration in the present and judgement in the future.  
Some people think that God's coming judgement stifles their freedom.  
Because they can't do whatever they feel like now,  
it puts their lives in a straight jacket.  
But unless your life is centred on God now,  
then doing whatever you like won't bring freedom,  
it will bring misery.  
Look at our society.  
People ignore God and do whatever they like,  
does it make them happy?  
No. Broken and damaged relationships are everywhere.  
Addiction and mental illness affect us in plague proportions.  
Solomon says,  
"Our lives are marching towards God and his judgement.  
So enjoy responsibly.  
If you pursue faith and love and peace,  
then you will find genuine joy.  
And you will have the freedom to go wherever your heart takes you.  
To neglect God is to neglect joy.  
God has designed us for pleasure,  
to enjoy all the pleasures that come from living faithfully in his service.  
In John 10:10, Jesus said,  
"I have come that they may have life  
and have it to the full."  
Jesus doesn't want to restrict our freedom.  
But he knows that life to the full consists of a wonderful relationship  
with your creator.  
So remember your creator in the days of your youth.  
That is the path to true joy.

If you live long enough,  
the golden years will come at last.  
And when they come,  
they will have their fair share of frustrations.  
Perhaps more than their fair share.  
And after that the sun will grow dark.

That's a motivation to remember your creator now.  
Take pleasure in the one who made you and live for his glory.  
Despite all the uncertainty of life,  
work hard so that you can serve others.  
Try some things in God's service,  
take some risks.  
And enjoy life responsibly.  
Remember that true enjoyment is found  
if you live with your creator in mind.  
That is the path to freedom and joy.