

Sermon, 26 January 2025, Church of Scotland Geneva

Text 1: Ecclesiastes 5: 13-20 (taken from New International Version):

¹³ I have seen a grievous evil under the sun: wealth hoarded to the harm of its owners,
¹⁴ or wealth lost through some misfortune,
so that when they have children
there is nothing left for them to inherit.
¹⁵ Everyone comes naked from their mother's womb,
and as everyone comes, so they depart.
They take nothing from their toil
that they can carry in their hands.
¹⁶ This too is a grievous evil:

As everyone comes, so they depart,
and what do they gain,
since they toil for the wind?
¹⁷ All their days they eat in darkness,
with great frustration, affliction and anger.
¹⁸ This is what I have observed to be good: that it is appropriate for a person to eat, to
drink and to find satisfaction in their toilsome labour under the sun during the few days
of life God has given them—for this is their lot. ¹⁹ Moreover, when God gives someone
wealth and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in
their toil—this is a gift of God. ²⁰ They seldom reflect on the days of their life, because
God keeps them occupied with gladness of heart.

Text 2: St Luke 18: 18-30

¹⁸ A certain ruler asked him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

¹⁹ "Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God
alone. ²⁰ You know the commandments: 'You shall not commit adultery, you shall not
murder, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honour your father and
mother.'^[a]"

²¹ "All these I have kept since I was a boy," he said.

²² When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have
and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

²³ When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was very wealthy. ²⁴ Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

²⁶ Those who heard this asked, "Who then can be saved?"

²⁷ Jesus replied, "What is impossible with man is possible with God."

²⁸ Peter said to him, "We have left all we had to follow you!"

²⁹ "Truly I tell you," Jesus said to them, "no one who has left home or wife or brothers or sisters or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God ³⁰ will fail to receive many times as much in this age, and in the age to come eternal life."

"Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die." The philosophy is essentially Epicurean, one of the two main streams of philosophy which were popular in the Roman Empire around the time of Jesus.

The other, Stoicism is still known today in terms of attitudes described as Stoic – dedicated to higher goals, self-sacrificing and noble, but with a lot of suffering implied in order to reach those goals. By contrast, Epicureanism encouraged as full an enjoyment as possible of earthly pleasures. You come into this world with nothing, you leave with nothing and so you might as well make the most of what's there while you can. It didn't necessarily encourage hurting others as a desirable virtue but the focus was on oneself and enjoyment.

So Ecclesiastes 5:18 seems strangely Epicurean in the Biblical context: "This is what I have observed to be good: that it is appropriate for a person to eat, to drink and to find satisfaction in their toilsome labour under the sun during the few days of life God has given them—for this is their lot." The Book of Ecclesiastes is, in fact, a collection of rather

fatalistic reflections by a certain Philosopher on the uselessness of life and God's blessings, mainly because wisdom, riches and achievements apparently count for nothing since they are all temporary, at least on the face of it. However, all this is still there in the Biblical canon so what are we to make of it ?

The question can only really be resolved by looking at what the real meaning is of the blessings we receive from God. Historically, this has not always been too easy a question. Are we supposed to enjoy what we can or not ? The Church of Scotland, and notably the Free Church of Scotland, have been long stereotyped as emphasizing guilt and sin over any sort of enjoyment: "If you're not feeling guilty, then you should feel guilty for not having anything to feel guilty about !" Jesus suffered and died for us, it's emphasized, so suffering becomes almost a virtue in itself.

However, there's something of a false logic here. There's an almost deliberate ignoring of other, inconvenient facts. Jesus Himself was not averse to eating and drinking with others, to attending parties or to encouraging others to take some joy in life. He and His Disciples can hardly have existed without some form of finances or else they wouldn't have needed Judas Iscariot in the first place to serve as their treasurer. His subsequent behaviour admittedly put the role into rather a bad light but it is still notable that treasurer was the only role among the Disciples which was defined explicitly.

We should certainly not take too literally what Jesus told the rich ruler in today's reading: "Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven." Does this mean that material blessings are inherently wrong ? Well, hardly. If they were, you wouldn't do the poor many favours by simply offloading these accursed blessings onto them.

If blessings were such a bad thing, wouldn't they be better off without them and their need would be zero ? In fact, if any sort of possession were a bad thing, wouldn't we find the Kingdom of God by all of us giving up absolutely everything and heading off to live in the nearest cave ? If you take the idea of wealth being a curse too literally, that is the logical conclusion.

The thing is, that it isn't the point. Both the ruler who came to Jesus, and the Philosopher of Ecclesiastes miss a critical point. Riches are a gift, not a right. They are not absolute. Only God is absolute. He sets the core values in life and he defines what really matters. If we can think of our existence in those terms, then we can start to see where the blessings fit in, which He gives to us.

This is a key message in what Jesus told the rich ruler. The man, presumably genuinely, wanted to know what he had to do to find eternal life, the Kingdom of God. He had already been following God's teachings on the subject but knew that he was falling short. Jesus told him quite bluntly, not that he needed to gain one more thing, but that he needed to get rid of his riches. Why ? Not because riches themselves were inherently dreadful but because for the ruler, they were as valuable as God's way.

Those who heard Jesus say this, assumed wrongly that He meant that there was no way to reconcile being blessed in any sort of material way with finding eternal life. However, Jesus told them, "What is impossible with man is possible with God." God's way can accommodate who we are, rich or poor, powerful or insignificant, healthy or sick. God is the ultimate ruler. He shows the way. He gives us blessings to one extent or

another, of one sort or another and He calls us not be blinded by them but to use them to find the ultimate blessing of God's way.

Which is all very well but then, doesn't it come down to almost the same thing ? Maybe we don't simply have to sell everything we have right now and send the cheque to the local food bank in order to achieve eternal salvation, but we do still need to give it all up in the longer term in a more measured response.

Again, though, this assumes that, like the stereotype of the traditional, Scottish preacher, the only "good" way is the way of suffering so we're not supposed to enjoy any benefit. We would be doing ourselves a disservice if we did. Therefore, employing what we have in God's service can only mean giving it up for something less pleasant.

This is where Ecclesiastes finally comes up with a solution to the problem which it identified so well: "when God gives someone wealth and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their toil—this is a gift of God."

The enjoyment of blessings is not in having them but is in fact in using them and using them wisely. God's way is not simply defined by unremitting suffering. On the contrary, if all the world were to look for what God shows us, it would be wonderful. That hope in God is the absolute. It is what we need to aim for, to learn for, to live for. We don't work for ourselves, we work for God, and in so doing we can find what it really means to enjoy life. His blessings enable us to do this and we may find enjoyment at the same time. It takes an investment of time and money to organize a Church Fair, a social group or a homeless outreach but that doesn't mean they can't be worth having or even that we might enjoy the experience. Donating to Mission work in Nepal and Malawi

means giving up some funds which might otherwise have bought a nice dinner out, but that does mean that all we do is resent it ?

Simply being rich is not necessarily going to make us very happy. The rich and famous seem to suffer from relationship breakdowns, drug and alcohol abuse or legal troubles at least as much as anyone else. Simply “having it all” is no great achievement in itself.

But it doesn't need to be. The Philosopher in Ecclesiastes concludes by saying of those working in God's way that, “They seldom reflect on the days of their life, because God keeps them occupied with gladness of heart.” Put another way, those serving God and hoping for His way do not lie awake worrying about money, status or ambition. They rejoice in living to the full the life which God has promised them, not in terms of achieving an end goal of wealth but in using everything they have to journey forward in faith and hope.

The rich ruler wanted to achieve a defined goal of eternal life but Jesus instructed him, “Then come, follow me.” God does not offer us a set endpoint but a journey which we can all follow. It does not matter if we have massive wealth or just about enough to get by on. It does not count for anything if we are amazingly talented or incredibly shy. It is irrelevant if we are male or female, what country we come from, what our social status is. The Kingdom of God, where His values rule, is there for all of us to work towards and to find. God has given us all different tools, different blessings and different abilities. We can and we will enjoy these when we follow in His way, when that is what matters, not the tools themselves.

So let's not be afraid to enjoy what we have but always remember to rejoice in why we have it and what we can do with it. Does it matter if

my neighbour has more money than I do ? Does it matter if my brother has a flashier career than I have ? Does it matter if I'm smarter than my friend ? Not at all if what really matters is loving God first and our neighbours as ourselves. Those values are no more and no less for any of us and we can all reach them irrespective of what we have been given to use. As Jesus said, "What is impossible with man is possible with God." It is not for us to define what we can and cannot achieve but when we know that it is worth getting there, we will find real enjoyment in using all we have to get there.