

Meaningless, Utterly Meaningless. Ecclesiastes 1 & 2.

HG notes:

Congratulations, you have been chosen out of thousands to be part of this homegroup. Value each other not as competitors on *The Apprentice* but perhaps more as fellow dancers from *Strictly*!

From Mid-January we're going to all do Christianity Explored, so we'll be buying lots of books and DVDs etc. It's a really good Alpha-ish thing. I'd like two volunteers from each group to come to the Rectory on Thurs 24th Nov 7.45 (end by 9.30) so that we can run through what that means.

NB 10th Nov will be the start of "Rev" series two. It should be compulsory watching, even for those of you who don't like it! Pray for Vicars! And Archdeacons, and congregations!

Welcome:

Who saw the last series of Rev? Why would I be encouraging people to pray?

Do Angels take you to heaven when you die? (a young child asked me this last Sunday. What would you have said and why?)

Likewise: Do animals go to heaven?

Worship: try Psalm 39. In vss 5,6,11 the word *breath* and *in vain* (NIV) is the same hebhel / hevel: elsewhere translated: meaningless. (Its not the usual word for breath: nephesh Gen 1.30) Hmm on second thoughts perhaps you should defiantly sing some thumping good hymns: Tell out my soul!

NOW would be a really good time for Someone Else to volunteer to do worship next week. By the way there won't be any HGnotes next week, go to which ever service you go to and make a note of the readings / the talk and talk about it. 9.30 Children Remember / 10.45 Remembrance.

Word:

1. Read Eccles 1 & 2.
2. What was my one word and why?
3. Why did I make such a big deal of 2.26?
4. Any tips on how to chin up? or how to encourage others?
5. Nit picking: surely Solomon would concede that the internet is new? The Nasa gravity defying pen?
6. Why does Rob Bell call it Vapour Management?
7. 1.13 What's this heavy burden? (actually I'd like to know your answer to this one!)
8. What areas did the Teacher explore – is there any category of life missing from this list?
9. Any tips for how to find satisfaction in your toil?
10. Feedback always welcomed.

Works:

Pray for those in work – that they may find satisfaction in their toil. Pray for those looking for a job. Lots and lots of you are involved in different clubs and socs. Pray for God's help in those roles, that you may be a blessing to them.

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I've been a bit grumpy this week. I'm not entirely sure why. I said to someone last week that we were going to be looking at this book of Ecclesiastes and that it was **depressing me** and he very kindly and cheerfully said Not to worry I'm sure you'll be able to **pull something good out of it!**

So I latched onto the obvious one word sermon: **Meaningless** and I have been muttering that to myself and meditating on it and it really **doesn't help**.

The idea of the one word sermon is that you should be able to stand in the **check out queue** and think "Tent" (last week 2Cor4/5) and encourage yourself that even if your bodily tent is feeling a bit creaky today, that you have a solid home in heaven.

But to go around muttering "**Meaningless**" is just depressing and **disheartening**. So my one word sermon for you is **Look Up**. You can take that at a physical level – if you can simply push your shoulders back a bit, chin up literally it may help you to chin up inside.

You can take it at a **spiritual level** – another key phrase in this book is that there is nothing new under the Sun. Over the next 12 chapters we'll see it pop up some **27** times.

And it means that IF your horizon, **if all you can see**, is the way in which you look the world – your search for meaning and purpose and satisfaction and peace – if your search is limited to what is **Under the Sun**, then you will discover that everything is Meaningless, a **Chasing after the Wind**.

So my one word sermon is a call for you to lift your eyes above the Sun, to **Look Up**, in your search for meaning and life.

The bible contains all **sorts of different styles** of writing, poetry, story, history, prophecy and apocalyptic literature and it includes what we call **Wisdom** literature – for example: the book of **Job**, some Psalms, **Proverbs**, Song of **Songs**, Ecclesiastes – all come under the Genre of Wisdom Literature. In my 10years here I have never preached to you any sermons of the Wisdom genre – sorry about that. Actually a long time ago I did preach about **Sex and Prayer** on the Song of Songs. So I hope to re-dress the imbalance and give you a bit of wisdom teaching.

It's always been said that Solomon wrote the Song of Songs in his **vigorous youth** and Proverbs in his middle age and now Ecclesiastes in his old age. And certainly that's how it feels. This reads like the teaching of a **weary old man**.

So the Teacher says **Meaningless** Meaningless! And it would seem that he's had a go at pretty much everything and that experience has left him **exhausted and unhappy**. On the whole I think the idea is **Not** that we should **copy** what this man has done but that we should save ourselves the trouble and **learn from his mistakes**, learn from his wisdom.

I was listening to a woman on the radio who said how she found herself doing a job that I **didn't enjoy** in order to buy stuff that she **didn't need** and so she stopped and set herself the challenge of rowing across the ocean! A job I didn't enjoy buying stuff I didn't need.

We go through phases like this ourselves and have glimpses of the meaninglessness of our lives and it can **really scare us** and depress us. If you get to the end of this sermon and you're still feeling depressed come and pray with someone in the prayer corner, have some extra sugar in your coffee and **Look Up**.

The book of **Proverbs** runs with the idea that if you are wise then good things will happen and if you are foolish then bad things will happen. Our **education system** says If you put in the

homework you should come out with some qualifications, our **Work Ethos** seems to say that if you put in the hours and work hard that you should succeed and be promoted. This all makes sense to us. But we also know that its not true. Some of us worked really hard at school whilst others of you seemed to **drift through effortlessly** and some of us get a good job but then we see others promoted over us or we see cut backs that cut us out whilst others get through. We see a thoroughly **unfair world**.

In the book of Proverbs, and in the ancient Jewish mindset — and we still see it today in our own thinking – that if you’re a **follower of Jesus** then God will look out for you and **bad** things wont happen.

That if you’ve got lots of **money** then it must be because God loves you and if you’re **suffering** from poor health then you must have done something wrong. We know that this isn’t true but we have a **tendency** to believe it.

The book of **Proverbs seems to encourage** this approach to wisdom (you’ll have to wait for my sermon series on Proverbs for me to unpack that, sorry).

So look at the last verse in today’s reading (2.26): To the man **who pleases God**, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. –

Now I’m not sure that that is **true**. I know lots of good godly saints who are not heavily bestowed with wisdom or knowledge or happiness and I know some sinners who are very wealthy and have some wisdom and knowledge. So I’m not sure if that’s true.

BUT and here’s the big twist – its **still meaningless**. Even if it is true: Its still chasing after the wind.

The Teacher is saying – **Even if you buy into** the cultural idea that if you’re wise or happy then God loves you and if you’re not then obviously God doesn’t – even if you buy into that argument – it is still meaningless! It’s still chasing after the wind!

This is where **Ecclesiastes pops a bubble** that we’ve always known was a bubble – if you play by the **rules** you can still get screwed / If you do the wise thing, you can still find that your life gets **turned upside down**.

So this Teacher looks over life and sees that days come and days go, that there’s nothing new under the sun, that you may live a long old life but a few years beyond that **who remembers?**

If you want to you can get **nit picky** and say Nothing new under the sun? But we can fly! **Solomon couldn’t fly!** So yes maybe you have a point OR Solomon might reply – all you have invented is what the birds have been doing since time began. All you have invented is a quicker method of travelling, I can walk, I can get a donkey, I can get a chariot, your plane is the same sort of thing. (Gravity defying pen vs pencil)

I don’t think getting nit picky will help I think we’re supposed to pick up the **depressing thrust of his argument**.

So Solomon ploughs his **energy into being Busy** – projects and building and management of slaves and of wealth. In to Entertainment and sex and all the pleasures he could think of. He tried Madness, he tried Wisdom (it is perhaps encouraging to us that he find wisdom better than stupidity!) but it leaves the Teacher hollow and empty. **I hated life**.

That's his conclusion? I hated life – Solomon worked so hard, he played by the rules and he won – he won such wealth but now he hates it **because he has to leave it** and who knows what the inheritor will do with it? Will he be wise or foolish?

There's a really **painful irony** here. Solomon is the Bill Gates / Steve Jobs of his day and yet when he dies he must leave it all to his son. And the **next king** after Solomon is **Rehoboam** and Rehoboam is the indescribably stupid idiot who lets it all slip through his fingers, his stupidity leads to the **breakdown** of the Israelite nation, to the **poverty** of the nation, to the exile and **scattering** of God's people across the known world.

It's **horrendously** sad and makes all that Solomon achieved painfully **meaningless** – this **fleeting** moment of success and grandeur that Solomon achieved – it's an **utter waste**.

For Solomon, the thing that brings him to the brink is **Funerals**. Death comes to us all – wise and foolish, to the successful and to the losers. The same funeral service awaits them all. And in no time at all we will be forgotten.

It could be that at this point you're feeling a little dizzy, something a kin to feeling **car sick**? A little down and depressed and in desperate need of a **sweet Cup of Tea** and some fresh air.

The basic advice with someone feeling car sick is to **look out of the window**. If you're on a boat and you're feeling sea sick, look to the **horizon** focus on that. If you're feeling a bit life-sick, then **Look Up**.

The teacher concludes his thinking so far and says **If all you can see is Under the Sun**, then eat and drink and try to find satisfaction in your work.

Certainly this is better than **busyng ourselves** with pleasure and entertainment, filling your life and time with seeking wealth and building projects – Rob Bell calls this **Vapour Management** – its all meaningless, chasing after the wind, its all vapour (the other way of translating Meaningless (Hevel)) Vapour management.

On the plus side it will keep you busy enough to keep at bay those **disquieting feelings** that it's all meaningless. It will prove to be exhausting but good luck to you.

Or take the hint and look above the Sun, **Look Up**.

St **Paul** says If you **have not love** then your life is a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal – it's a hollow sham – without love.

Jesus said Mark 8v36 **What good is it** for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?

It's all meaningless. To gain the world but lose your soul! To move mountains and give everything to the poor – but without God's love – it's all meaningless.

John 10.10 Jesus said: I have come that they may have life, and have it **to the full**.

So Look Up and **receive from God** the joy and peace that comes from living under His sun, watching His sun come up and go down again and again and yet we know that there is so much more to life and to death than what we can see Under the Sun. and that's why we Look Up. Amen.