

## Eccles 5-7 27<sup>th</sup> Nov 2011 Vapour: Meaningless or Temporary?

### HOMEGROUPS

I'll do some HG notes for next week (Mark 1.1-8) but then you're on your own until we come back to Ecclesiastes 8 – 12 we'll have two more weeks on that.

Then Mark's Gospel. There won't be any sermon notes for that period because we'll all be doing (10weeks) Christianity Explored. Everybody gets a course book, At least one person will need the Leaders Book (it tells you when to put the DVD on and what questions to ask). There will be some DVDs though you'll need to share. The DVD is really good, the talks there are quite short (about 15mins). You can borrow my laptop if you're a small group or the projector if you're a big group or just huddle around the telly. There is homework too – mostly reading Mark's Gospel.

NB pretty please send a rep or two to Rectory 12<sup>th</sup> January 7.30pm so we can run through the How to bit.

Welcome: Does anyone do anything to mark the season of Advent?

Worship: its advent 1, God coming under the sun, sing: O come O Come Emmanuel! Psalm 80.1-8 is the set Ps for this Sunday.

Word: *too many questions again, sorry about that.*

1. Read Eccles 5.1-7
2. Why go to Church?
3. Read Eccles 5.8-6.2
4. How does this section make you feel about money – do you want more? Cynical about banks / government?
5. If everything is meaningless why does he call it a grievous evil? (5.13,16, 6.2)
6. There are 10 refs to God giving in the whole book – only 4 in these chapters and all relating to money, so why pick on it as the One Word?
7. What one word would you have used?
8. Read 6.3-7.6
9. Why is proper burial such a big deal? What of the soldiers?
10. Is it just me or are we supposed to find the ref to 'stillborn' repugnant.
11. Likewise what's is Solomon trying to say about going to parties vs going to funeral wakes?
12. Read 7.7-18
13. Of course the old days were better than these days but why is it foolish to ask? And why do we still do it?
14. 5.10, 6.12, 7.15, what happens if you take our 'meaningless' and put in 'temporary' or 'vapour' does it help?
15. Why is God evidently an Englishman?
16. Read Eccles 7.19-29
17. Actually the word 'upright' is not in the Hebrew in vs 28, it is in vs 29. In fact there's no word at all. "I found one man among a thousand but not one woman" – put that into the context and does it change the meaning at all? What is Solomon looking for?

Works: Sometimes its great if males and females can pray separately why not boldly suggest the menfolk go off to the kitchen and pray.

Pray for the Christmas Fair, for the many services coming up, for who you can give a lift to / invite to a service.

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Meaningless **meaningless** – if people know anything about the book of Ecclesiastes they come out with this phrase about how everything is meaningless. I'm rather hoping by now that you're clever enough to at least qualify that phrase – so: okay it is meaningless – everything under the sun is meaningless but the trick is to **Look Up**. To discover that God has made everything beautiful in its time, how He has set eternity in our hearts and made us for heaven. I also hope that as you've been **reading this book** and that as you read it it has **stirred** up thoughts and **emotions** in you. In the first week I was a bit depressed, Last week I got a bit **angry** because King **Solomon saw** the injustice of the Courts and the oppression of the poor and he **did nothing** about it.

And even while he was banging on about how **meaningless everything is** – yet we could see even in chapter 3 that **God was at work**. So my sermon was a call for us to see the **hand of God** at work in the world and for us to think about what we do, and the **meaning of life that we bring** – so we fold our hands feeling we have nothing to give, are we so busy holding on to what makes us feel safe and secure – so we cannot receive, we cannot give. Hand.

We do of course have one great **advantage over Solomon** the wise – and that is that we live on the **other side of Easter Day**. We have seen the revelation of **God in Jesus**, we have seen the Lord the **giver of life** come and live this so called meaningless life. We have heard the words of Jesus – I have come that you might have life and **life to the full** (Jn10.10)– that's a long way away from Solomon's meaningless life.

So ultimately we find that without God in our lives life is meaningless. Without seeing that **God in Jesus has come under the Sun**, without the Holy Spirit at work in the world – then yes life is ultimately meaningless.

It reminds me of a debate I was **losing at university**, a very clever man telling me how we are just a bundle of bio-chemicals - that's all we are and when I pushed him he said that even Love was just a jumping of electrical impulses between the synapses of the brain, that's all. You can't knock the man for his consistency and he knew he had soundly defeated me, so I turned to his girlfriend and said Remember that when he kisses you goodnight.

This week we have a **range of issues**, it starts with **worship** and moves on to **money** and then onto some strange stuff mostly about **death** and then it concludes saying Don't be **over righteous** – So God is an Englishman it would seem.

Why have you come here this morning? When you woke up this morning and said Lets go to Church – why, **what were you thinking?** Lots of you are on **Rotas** so you might have felt a strong sense of duty, others have simply got in the habit, its what we do, Thursday evenings we watch Rev, Sunday mornings we go to Church!

Solomon says **Guard your steps** when you go to Church – go to **listen** rather than speak and utter rash vows - go to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools who go through the motions rather than think about what they're doing. **Go to receive** rather than think you're the ones doing the giving. Yes we give time and money and effort and our lungs! But the astonishing thing about this morning is that we get a moment when we **can be aware that we stand** in the presence of Almighty God as we sing His praises

– for a moment we draw near and we become **aware that God has drawn near to us**.

We come to remember the life and death of Christ and as we eat and drink these symbols we're aware of how very close Jesus is to us. There is a moment here when we might see that **God has come under the Sun** and is with us even here, even this morning.

So Solomon warns us against **shallow, hollow worship** and he warns us about **money** – its corrupting power and the stresses and responsibility it brings to those with lots of money.

And he introduces a new phrase for us. **Evil**, I have seen a grievous evil – a rich man who loses it all and has nothing to pass on to his son, a rich man who never gets round to enjoying his wealth. (5.13, 6.1). And alas it doesn't matter if you're rich or not, **you can't take it with you**.

No matter what you achieve financially in this life, that's it, you don't get to take anything with you – and **Solomon** sees this as a **grievous evil**. (Of course he would, he has become terribly rich!)

I still find that odd. Solomon has been banging on about how meaningless life is but now he wants to argue that this is wrong, **unfair, its an evil** and its **God's fault** (6.2).

[Actually the Hebrew here isn't Evil but disease, an injury, a sickness]

You'll remember from my first sermon that the word we translate **Meaningless** is **hevel** – sometimes translated Vanity (King James) or Smoke (Message) or literally Vapour.

But as we've seen with vapour and mist and fog, they are very real even if they are **passing**, so maybe when we read this word Meaningless we should sometimes read the word Vapour or perhaps we should put in the word **Temporary**. Everything is temporary.

On the one hand when we find out that things are temporary then that **devalues** them – we like to buy **Christmas presents** that will last, that are hard to break or that we think will be played with for many months to come. We like things that last a long time. So we're keeping that sense of Meaningless.

BUT when we think about people or relationships – if we apply the word **Temporary to them** then that changes things.

If I have a **short time** left to enjoy my friends before Monday starts and we're all **back at school**, at work – then I want to make the most of what little time I have to enjoy them.

I must realise that I will only have **my children** at home for so long and I'm already half way through that time! They won't be under my roof for that much longer. Some parents might be thinking Hurrah at this point but others might think – gosh I really should make the **most of this short time** that we have together.

The time is **passing**, its all **vapour** but somehow that **doesn't make it meaningless**, it means that I must quickly recognise that this time is temporary and that causes me to **want to make the most of each moment**. It means that I really don't have time to get very **upset** about **petty** things, I don't have time to hold **grudges** or get **revenge**, time is too short – it may all be **hevel** but I'm not sure that it is all **meaningless**, but it is certainly all temporary.

It's **not wise** to ask Why were the **old days** better than these (7.10) and now you know why – **there's isn't the time** to spend it wishing for the past.

We are made to live in the **Now**. “Better what the eye sees than a roving appetite” (6.9, see also 7.14 re future). Absolutely **enjoy what you've got right now** rather than coveting what you don't have.

There's some good **common sense proverbial** stuff here – A good name is better than fine perfume – lovely stuff shouldn't really need explaining. I think it is designed to get you **nodding your head**

because Solomon then says the day of death is better than the day of birth. And you're immediately brought up short. Better a **house of mourning** than a house of **feasting**. What? That's ridiculous! No wonder Billy Joel sang **I'd rather laugh with the sinners** than cry with the saints the sinners are much more fun!

Some of this is really quite **repugnant** – better the stillborn (6.3) than the one who never enjoys what he has – even if I understand that – it's a really horrible way to put it.

Of course it is. But everynow and then we need a **slap in the face with a wet fish**. What will it take for you to sit up and think about things that really matter?

Mostly at **parties** we spend the time avoiding the things that matter and getting plenty of sugar or **fizz** or alcohol or food into your system. **Feasting is about avoiding** the wake up call.

Going to a **funeral is very sobering**. I wonder if Solomon had written “Better the man who has a mild transient stroke (TIA – transient ischaemic attack) than the one who receives the box set of Downton Abbey!”

I think Solomon is asking **What will it take** for you wake up and make the most of this temporary, **transient** passing moment. Not to see life as meaningless and so lets drown it in alcohol and kill time with entertainment, but to see it as a **gift**, each **precious passing** moment as a gift to enjoy.

My one word sermon this week is **Gift**. Not because you're all wondering what to give me for Christmas. But because I think that it's the key word to unlocking much of the book of Ecclesiastes and to unlocking much of life.

I began by asking you **why** you came to Church this morning – perhaps it was to give, perhaps it was to receive – in either case this sense of **expectancy** brings some hope and meaning.

Money worries come next **but if we could** come to see our wealth and possessions as a **gift from God** (5.19). If we could see our food and drink and work as a gift from God. It might take off us some of the stress.

These things are from God, **let's enjoy** what God has given us, enjoy the **work** we have at hand, while we still have some time, while we can.

If we view this life, not so much as meaningless but as a **temporary vapour** – perhaps it will lead us not to get too het up about somethings – its all passing.

This is where we discover that **God is an Englishman!** The man who fears God will avoid all extremes (7.18)– very English – so we don't get over righteous (7.16) and we don't get over wise. Nor do we view this temporary life as an excuse for getting away with evil.

If we view this life as **temporary** then maybe it will give us the **wake up slap** that we need to see how time is short and now is the time for us to be enjoying each other, encouraging each other, forgiving sins and letting go and to focus on what matters.

**God has given us so much** – perhaps we might come to view all that we have as a gift from God. You are God's gift to me and so, God help you, I am God's gift to you.

May you come to see Jesus as the gift of God, may you come to know the Holy Spirit as the gift from God. May you come to see each other as a gift from God. And may you come to see this day as a gift from God. Amen.