Devotional on Ecclesiastes 4
“Persons-in-Community”

The Bible was not given to us to satisfy our curiosity but to shape our lives in a particular way in response to God.

It is worth saying this as we move, in our series “Keeping it Real” from a consideration of “the times” and of “the Flow” to a reflection on oppression and injustice in the world in the next section of Ecclesiastes. The underlying question is always, “what will the shape of your life look like?”

**Original Meaning:** The world is a place of striving after “gain,” a place where people try to “master reality” rather than live in submission to it’s breath-like nature. As such it is a place of tears and disproportionate power.

In the Bible oppression involves cheating, whether on someone’s husband or wife or a neighbour; it involves unjust gain, whether through exorbitant interest rates or abuse of power. It is perpetrated on those who have no power to fight back, the poor, the widow or the orphan.

Here in this text, particularly in v. 4 we see that the fires of human striving after gain or mastery are identified, “Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from one person’s envy of another.” Which of course is the 10th commandment.

The first Commandment “you shall have no other gods besides me” is filled out as permission and call in Jesus’ “Love the Lord with all your heart, mind, soul and strength.” The 10th commandment “You shall not covet” is filled out as permission and call in Jesus’ “and love your neighbour as yourself.” The eight other commandments are commentaries on these two.

It is suspicion or realization that others are “gaining” more from life than we which leads to the mad competition of the rat race which of course ends up devastating the world. The upwardly mobile trample the poor and the creation itself. All of this is “empty,” a “chasing of the wind.

Modern society in all it’s political iterations is about “getting ahead.” But what’s the point? As the next section points out this is “lonely” and a “futile and miserable way to live.”

Here Qohelet offers a stirring and profoundly counter-cultural metaphor which echoes the creation myth of Genesis two “it is not good for the human to be alone.” Rather than singular achievement, it is cooperation that leads to a rewarding life, both for the individual and the community.

Life is interesting and rewarding when troubles are faced together. There will be cold and dark nights but there is warmth in another’s presence; in committed relationships, physical warmth, metaphorically, warmth in knowing we’re truly “in this together.”

Is the third cord God? Jewish and Christian interpreters have said so, Qohelet doesn’t make this plain. I think he means that even two can become myopic, we need the third to open us to new possibilities, new strength. In this way, God is surely more than a mere 3rd! God is what makes our risk-taking in community possible.

The final bit of our text today are confusing with talk of the poor but wise youth and the old and foolish King. Here Qohelet, I think, is imagining not only Solomon but “kingship as such.”

In other words, this is not the real world of kings that Qohelet is referring to. In the ANE the succession of one humbly born king by another would have been unlikely. Rather, it is the world of human advancement that is here exposed.

It’s better to have wisdom with poverty than advancement with folly. It is better to live modestly as two than as one with mere empty toil. Advancement all too often brings the loss of the self as we lose touch with our roots and our finite existence.

**Bridging to Other Parts of the Bible**

This text fits with the message of the Bible as a whole. We remind ourselves that in the great primeval myths of Genesis 1-11 God created humans to live in community with God, each other and the created order, giving humanity the job of tending, nurturing and managing the earth.

As those chapters unfold we are told that like ripples in a pond, our alienation from God and each other has led to oppression, murder and alienation from the created order. Indeed, these chapters have a universal and contemporary ring to them which is why they are so enduringly truthful.

From these opening chapters we then trace God’s great project, pinned on Abram and Sarai that there might yet be a society where work matters, yes, where individual responsibility is taken seriously, yes, but also where the wider community learns that it’s very purpose is not to “get ahead” but to share resources.

The Bible as a whole recognizes the privileged position of the wealthy and the elite and the structural inequities that mean it’s never as simple as asking someone to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps.

At the beginning of the book of Acts we see the early Church live into the idealism of Israel’s laws when they freely, not coercively, share with each other.

We come to Ecclesiastes 4 with all of this in mind. Here we find no simple “communist vision” or a “capitalist vision” but someone who is committed to “keeping it real;” that is someone who is not so naïve to say we can simply “put things right.”

In light of this Qohelet wants us to see the world clearly and act accordingly. If we can’t simply “fix society” we can still believe that it is God’s will to bring about loving justice. We can believe that hard work carried out, not simply for our advancement, not carried out because of envy, but for the sake of the community and with others is true wisdom and fulfillment.

In one of the African languages, sorry, I don’t know which one, the noun for a non-African white person is a “person who endlessly rushes around to no apparent purpose.” In contrast, there is a popular soccer program in Europe that sets high standards of excellence but will not allow individuals to advance to the next stage of the program until the whole team is ready to advance.

That can, if you’re like me, begin to gnaw at a sense of “fairness.” But maybe its because I’ve not yet really heard what Ecclesiastes is trying to tell me.

Everything depends on what our goals are. Where are we going? Am I aiming at the fulfillment of my dreams (secular goal) or “getting to heaven” (religious goal). These two goals are considered simpatico in vast swaths of the church who believe in some version of the “American/North American dream.”

But the Bible is actually having none of it. As Jesus made clear, it’s all about persons-in-community. The proper goal of the Christian life is not an individualistic success or a heaven after life but right relationship with God, neighbour and God’s world *now* and in the future, which will include, by God’s great grace, a future extending beyond death!

We can, and will if we are wise, root out sins of envy. Don’t make it the aim of life to “get ahead,” but to “live well with God and neighbour.”

We can, and will if we are wise, root out all forms of racism, sexism, homophobism and nationalism. We can open our eyes to the oppression around us and act in realistic and small ways to share with our neighbours.

When we act in this way, taking our identity as a person-in-community as our basic, indeed God’s understanding of us! We do good for others but also we do good to ourselves. When we live in concert with reality, we not only “keep it real” in terms of being a person of integrity and honest, but we actually create reality in that we enter it more fully and joyfully!

One final comment here, it is truly depressing to hear Christians who identify as “liberal” or “conservative,” “as leaning to the left” or as “right wing,” as if the label “Christ follower” were secondary.

The call and task of love is so much fuller and more interesting than can ever be captured in a political ideology! The Bible as a whole and here in Ecclesiastes we can see the beauty of the Bible’s nuances: hard work sure, but not separate from advocacy for the poor and oppressed.

Truly loving God and neighbour will be the biggest, but also the most interesting challenge of our lives and certainly nothing that can be “reduced.” We are called to “eat, drink and enjoy” openheartedly. I wonder what that will mean for St. Thomas and St. Matthew, for you and me today!