

Money and Meaning

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 31 July 2016

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Pentecost 11C

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23; Luke 12: 13-21;

Contemporary reading "Love's Faithfulness" by Kathy Keay

in *Laughter, Silence and Shouting: An anthology of women's prayers*

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "Sunday Reflections" tab

How would you define "the good life," - what makes our lives rich and rewarding and full? Of course, an income that covers the basic needs of living - food, shelter, clothing, medical care, education - must be a starting point, but we also know how easy it is to measure the quality of our lives by the quantity of our goods and the size of our income. It seems to be part of the human condition, that we think we would be happier and our lives more meaningful if only we had a bit more.

Both the gospel reading and the reading from the book of Ecclesiastes address the issue of meaning. And they address it in terms of our relationship to economy.

When people ask me about how I can be a Christian because "*the bible says x, y, and z*" my response is that the Bible says a huge range of different things about life, the universe and everything. The shape of biblical wisdom changed over time and circumstance. So rather than being a rule book, or even a book of unchanging wisdom, the Bible, both testaments, is a record of the people of God searching for self-understanding and seeking to grasp the relationship of the community of God - to that sacred source of life and love.

And the contemporary reading today, the poem by Kathy Keay, I chose because it speaks to that sensibility and that search in our time. Kathy Keay, like Koheleth, the author of Ecclesiastes, and Jesus, determines that meaning comes not from deception, vanity and pride, not from accumulation, but from love, which transforms life's journey.

As a poet addresses Love, so people of faith, address the ground of our being, which we sometimes name God. And we claim in this love, our meaning, our calling to live toward justice and peace in the world. And we claim its power to transform us.

The three-year cycle of the lectionary doesn't serve up much from Ecclesiastes. If we had a New Years' Day service, you would hear the passage that the Seekers made famous about there being a time for every purpose under heaven. A time to be born, a time to die, a time to laugh, a time to cry, etc...turn, turn, turn... And then, once every three years these scattered verses are an option for the 11th Sunday after Pentecost.

It's quite remarkable that the book of Ecclesiastes even made it into the Old Testament. When the Rabbis were making their decisions about the Hebrew canon, it was believed that Solomon was the author, and that may have clinched it. But the content of the book, at first glance anyway, seems to be the antithesis of Israel's theology and ethics.

And it certainly seems to contradict what the Rabbi Jesus taught two centuries later, in the story we heard today from Luke's gospel. The counsel to eat, drink and be merry in Ecclesiastes is rejected in favour of a critique of self-centredness and greed.

Themes

At first glance, Ecclesiastes appears nihilistic. Koheleth denies earlier optimistic claims about wisdom's power to make sense of existence.

The writer sees no discernible principle of order governing the universe, rewarding virtue and punishing evil.

The creator is generally distant and uninvolved.

Death cancels all imagined gains, rendering life on earth meaningless and absurd.

And so the author claims that the best advice is: *enjoy your partner, food and drink during youth, for old age and death will soon put an end to this relative good.* Very cheery stuff!

He believes that no absolute good will survive death.

At one point, he seems to claim that profit is thus the measure of life for him. But almost immediately he undermines his sceptical conclusion. Then reports this discovery—there is no profit.

The book of Ecclesiastes is, however, interesting, because it bears witness to an intellectual crisis in Israel, or at least in the circles Koheleth taught in. And it addresses the search for meaning that has marked human life through the millennia.

A few years ago post-theistic New Zealand theologian Lloyd Geering wrote a book in which he entered into dialogue with Koheleth. It was titled "*Such is Life.*" He found much more encouragement in Ecclesiastes than most interpreters do and felt that it was an important book to be recovered in our time.

In "*Such is Life*" he pointed out the connections to the wisdom of Jesus, which Christians often portray as unique and superior to Hebrew wisdom.

At one point in the dialogue Geering tells Koheleth about the radical wisdom of Jesus in the teaching: "*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*" Koheleth responds that even this has its roots in Jewish wisdom in the saying in Proverbs, "*If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat, and if she is thirsty, give her water to drink.*"

Geering challenges our assumption that the history of the world was split in two: before and after the birth, life and death of Jesus. In a bigger view of human history, he says both Koheleth and Jesus lived "*between the times*" at the end of tribalism and the emergence of critical reflection and self-consciousness.

Geering suggests that this may be why Koheleth sounds so pessimistic. He was facing a spiritual and political void – perhaps not unlike our time. Koheleth speaks now to a community that must also engage in critical thinking in response to the mystery of life. We are continually putting to the test the answers that both the past and present offer us.

So let's look at the gospel story which challenges the assumption that wealth will provide meaning and contentment. Though they have different philosophical frameworks, Koheleth and Jesus both reach the same conclusion: the futility of seeking wealth.

In Luke's gospel the hard-done-by son, who feels that his brother has not given him his fair share of the inheritance, and who asks Jesus to mediate, is told a story. Jesus declines to judge the case.

Instead he offers an invitation to see wealth and life in a new way. As we seek peace, in our world, in our communities, in our families and in our own hearts, it behoves us also to reflect on the connection between economics and social well-being.

The parable about the farmer who stores up his wealth is not hard to understand. Jesus is telling us that accumulated wealth does not equal security. It is the quality of one's life, marked by openness to the way of the God of peace and justice, that is our inheritance.

As is common in Luke, the parable includes a glimpse into the inner thoughts of the main character. The farmer wonders what to do with his good fortune (and this kind of good fortune happening in the harsh geography of Israel, reminds us that Jesus used hyperbole and humour in parable telling. It's meant to be a ridiculous story to make a point.)

In the process of the farmer's wondering, hearers of the story learn two important things about him. First, he seems accountable or responsible to no one else. It never occurs to him to share his wealth with others who have less. He is oblivious to his membership of a community. Secondly, God also does not enter the equation. He neither gives thanks for nor seeks God's guidance. He is a paragon of self-sufficiency, unable to see the web of human relationship in which he needs relationship with others and others need him.

Jesus does not use the parable to teach that an abundant harvest is wrong. It is not the circumstances, but rather the response that is the subject of the parable. The farmer's response does not contribute to peace-making and justice because he fails to share what he has, and he fails to recognise the basis of human community in relationship.

The farmer's crazy plan is not too dissimilar to that of the right wing neo-conservative think tanks who have directed the policies of western democracies since the 1980s.

It is easy to see that certain parties, movements, ideologies, nations and corporations have succumbed to the world view of the rich fool. They plan out a new world order without realizing its futility. In the 1990s grand plans "for a new American century" were at the basis of the quagmire of violence that exists in Iraq, Afghanistan, the occupied Palestinian territories and which now flows into Europe and the USA (and even here) in the form of small scale, but very deadly terrorism.

We remember today the places where the violence in the world is overt and horrifying, the places we read about in the newspaper: in Syria and Iraq and others. But let us also recall the violence that is extreme poverty. We seldom hear those stories.

Few writers addressing the horrifying images of last Monday's Four Corners exposé of brutality towards boys in detention in the Northern Territory examine the implications of colonialism and the systematic economic deprivation of Indigenous people.

In the violence of poverty, people suffer from starvation, inadequate health care, from exploitative working conditions, from child labour, from a world governed by a free trade ideology that brings no freedom to the poor.

Engaging with Ecclesiastes invites us to think for ourselves about the meaning of life. It invites us to respond to the challenge to open ourselves to a search for meaning and a call to live well in relation with others.

But in Jesus, though, we find more hope. And I think that is because even we sophisticated twenty-first century people are storied people. Shaped by stories. We respond to stories. We create stories to make sense of our lives.

Jesus understood that and he has left us a legacy of stories.

Jesus and Koheleth both understood that we do not know the hour of our death and we cannot take our riches with us. But they reached different conclusions about how to live well in the interim.

Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow you die is one framework. Yes, our mortal lives are limited. We do not know when we will die. And we have no certainty about what happens beyond death.

But if we live in community in ways that are shaped by the stories Jesus told, we will know meaning and no matter what life brings, there will at times be joy – and we will touch the source of hope that will enable us to believe that life can be different for the poor of the world.

Where Ecclesiastes focused on the world's lack of any clear purpose and on the fact that nothing lasts, Jesus focused on what it is possible to make of life in the here and now.

Lloyd Geering downplays Jesus's spirituality. He calls him a secular sage. I disagree. Jesus was a Spirit person and it was the experience of Spirit, of encounter with sacred power, that took him on the path of telling stories that led human beings to live in right relation with one another.

And from the encounter with Spirit, Jesus had a dream of a world made new, a dream called the reign of God. A dream in which we are invited to participate.

Are we also willing to care about the violence done daily to the poor of the world? Are we willing to turn in loving kindness toward the dispossessed and to challenge the system of the world that regards extreme poverty as normal?

Are we willing to allow ourselves to be challenged by the stories Jesus told and the story of his life? To truly believe that the majority of us already have more than enough – and that our meaning can be found in sharing what we have and in changing the world so that there is justice and peace for all.