

## Koheleth

The book of Ecclesiastes on the surface seems to be a very despairing, depressing look at life. You may find it hard to understand why anyone could get enthusiastic about it. However for me, along with the Book of Job, it is my favourite Old Testament text. I love the imagery, the poetry, the phrases and I think the man who wrote it. It is full of philosophical realism - and especially the poem in Chapter three about time. There is a time to be born and a time to die  
As I get older that view of time is in some senses meaningful and actually comforting.

I shall return to an examination of the author's views on time later on.

For the moment we need to consider some more basic issues.

The name Ecclesiastes is the name that we find in the English versions of the Bible for the writing called in the Hebrew Bible Koheleth. Koheleth is the name I shall use for the author and I shall use Ecclesiastes for the name for the book.

It forms part of the third section of the Tanak, the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, coming after the Law and the Prophets.

Koheleth is one of the five rolls (Megilloth) that are read during the Jewish festivals. They are Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes (Koheleth) and Esther. Ecclesiastes was always read at the Autumnal festival of Tabernacles, probably to temper the rejoicing of the occasion by the salutary reminder of the more serious and sombre experiences of life.

I always felt that the ASB lectionary in the Church of England somehow got it right when it organised for Koheleth to be read at Matins and Evensong in mid-October.

### Who was the Author?

“The words of the Preacher (Koheleth), the son of David, king in Jerusalem.” 1:1

“I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem.” 1:12

Nor surprisingly the tradition of the Synagogue is that the book was written by Solomon, son of King David. That generally has been the decision of the Orthodox, although one remote source acknowledged the possible involvement of Hezekiah in the book's earliest stages.

However there are serious problems with this view.

1. David did not have a son called Koheleth
2. 1:16 refers to “all who were before me in Jerusalem...” but there was only King David

In 16<sup>th</sup> century Luther denied that Solomon was the author

The 17<sup>th</sup> century scholar and philosopher Hugo Grotius also denied Solomonic authorship.

The nature of the language used (and I will look at this in more detail in a moment) does not come from 1000 BCE but from the Post-Exilic Persian period.

### So who was the author?

The term Koheleth is used 7 times in the book

1. As a personal name in three places (1:1, 1:2, 1:12) with the definite article.
2. As a reference to a title or a function

7:12 “Behold, this is what I found, says the Preacher, adding one thing to another to find the sum,”

12:8 “Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity”.

3. As a wise man or sage who studied wisdom

12:9 “Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge”

12:10 “The Preacher sought to find pleasing words, and uprightly he wrote words of truth.”

The noun is a feminine participle from the verb **קהל** (*QaHaL*) to convoke or assemble. Revised English Bible translated it “Speaker” New RSV “Teacher” Luther “Preacher” When the Greek translation of the Old Testament was made the Hebrew was rendered **Εκκλησιαστής** (*Ekklesiastes*) one who leads the congregation. The author was a professional teacher of the wisdom school who took the pseudonym of “Solomon”

### Was there just one author?

This is one of those issues which seems to have temporarily gone away from recent scholarship.

In the past some sources have suggested there was one author others have suggested multiple authors, One book even got the total up to 9.

Robert Gordis maintained though that there was only one.

“The book emerges as a literary unit, the spiritual testament of a single, complex, richly endowed personality.”

The nature of the problem is two-fold

1. Additions and contradictions such as:-

2:24a “There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil.”

7:2 “It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting;” See also 9:4 and 6:3

Seemingly editorial additions involving a change from 1<sup>st</sup> person to 3<sup>rd</sup> person  
1:2 7:27 12:8 where Koheleth is referred to in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person.

2. Scribal additions

To a certain extent many of these examples are a bit academic and unless we have a thorough knowledge of proverbs recorded elsewhere the additions don't really mean very much. It is just that there are quite a number of them apparently.

You and I might notice scribal additions, that is where the author seems to depart from what the Hasidim ... the orthodox and probably you and I as well would consider to be morally acceptable.

The most obvious example is in 11:9b

“Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth; walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes.”

And to this is added

“But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment.” 11:9c

Well for some commentators this rather constitutes orthodoxy putting the brakes on the writer. In the last two chapters there are a number of disputed passages and it depends entirely how you interpret the originals

Phrases like

“Cast your bread upon the waters” 11:1

<sup>6</sup>“In the morning sow your seed, and at evening withhold not your hand;” 11:6

James Crenshaw – who in a recent article stated he was not terribly impressed by the idea of a number of contributors simply classes the additions as “moralistic glosses.”

End of story

### **Date of Koheleth**

It is back to square one.

I have rather pinned my colours to the mast and suggested that the book was not written by Solomon but by someone who assumes his name and writes in what he feels is the spirit of Solomonic wisdom

When did this author live?

We need to look at the style of the writing, what hints the book may give us and external evidence.

### **Style of writing**

Was the book originally written in Hebrew? We would say yes because it got into the Old Testament and I expect you know that unless there was a Hebrew original of a book it wasn't going to get into what Protestants call the Old Testament – or the Jerusalem Canon whichever you prefer.

But that is much later and there were unhappy rumblings about Ecclesiastes in other literature and in rabbinic circles for many years before that.

If you had been studying theology in the 1940s or 1950s you would have taken notice of scholars such as Zimmermann and Grinsberg who believed that the original language of the book of Koheleth was Aramaic – because of the large number of Aramaic phrases found in the work.

The Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in 1946 however produced fragments of Koheleth in Hebrew and the evidence from these seemed to tip the balance back towards regarding the original as a Hebrew book and not a translation from something else.

These Aramaic phrases are similar to others found in late writing such as Daniel, Esther, Song of Songs and the Mishnah.

Some words in Koheleth are Persian loan words – words such as *pardesh* (park) *medinah* (province)

This sort of evidence is pushing the date of the book to the very end of the Old Testament period.

### **How this impacts on the date**

1 Koheleth may be a grumbler, he may define all sorts of things are worthless but he does not deny or even question the existence of God.

On the contrary he is a thoroughgoing monotheist – so I would put a starting point around the date of Second Isaiah – that is 550 BCE.

The doctrine of the after-life was gaining popularity. Koheleth, like Job seems to indicate that he is aware of it but rejects the notion.

2, Judging by what Koheleth says about the nature of government it would seem that he is not living in a time of turmoil or political upheaval.

In the Post-Exilic period there was a good deal of this so in positioning the author to in a window of history we are looking for a time of relative stability. By far the most likely would seem to be during the rule of the Ptolemies in the first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE.

In deciding this we have to avoid the instability produced by the Seleucid rulers. If he had been writing as late as the time of Antiochus 4<sup>th</sup> (175-164 BCE ). He was the ruler who ordered the desecration the Temple at Jerusalem by introducing a statue of Zeus. This and other decrees indirectly led to the revolt by the Maccabees. I feel there is no hint of this in the book.

3 If you go through the book very carefully you might well discover a number of historical allusions that might just help us. I have looked very carefully at these and have taken note of what various scholars have said about them. Sadly no two commentators seem to agree and inasmuch as very similar allusions seem to appear in Egyptian literature, I am of the opinion that either these bits of history were obvious to the first readers and are now sadly lost or they were a literary device which was very much in fashion at the time of writing. So I do not feel on either score that these so called historical allusions help us in any way to date the book of Ecclesiastes.

Terminus non post quem is fixed by the fact that the writing of Jesus ben Sirach in the Apocrypha. In his book he clearly shows that he is familiar with Koheleth.

The preface to the Greek version of Ben Sirach was 132 BCE.

The Hebrew original dates from 190-180 BCE

If we allow 50 years for Koheleth to circulate and become accepted as a serious religious work which could be utilized by Ben Sirach, we would then be looking at a date of around 250BCE for Koheleth.

What we have done so far is to put Koheleth into a tiny spotlight and we have said – that is where he is and that is where he fits.

What I want to do next is to throw back the curtains and show you the entire stage.

**We tend to think that there is nothing like this book anywhere else.**

Certainly as a book it is unique in the Old Testament.

But is this style of literature unique?

Is he one miserable little old man wittering on about how bad things are.

The answer is “No”

Even in the Bible Psalms 39 and 49 have very strong similarities with the book of Ecclesiastes. Both the Psalms and Ecclesiastes refer to people who accumulate things without any assurance of gathering them in permanently. Koheleth talks about the uncertainty produced by inheritance – now compare that with Psalm 49

I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me; <sup>19</sup>and who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. <sup>20</sup> So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labours under the sun, <sup>21</sup> because sometimes a man who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by a man who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. <sup>22</sup> What has a man from all the toil and strain with which he toils beneath the sun? <sup>23</sup> For all his days are full of pain, and his work is a vexation; even in the night his mind does not rest. This also is vanity.

Yea, he shall see that even the wise die,  
the fool and the stupid alike must perish  
and leave their wealth to others.

<sup>11</sup> Their graves <sup>[a]</sup> are their homes for ever,  
their dwelling places to all generations,  
though they named lands their own.

<sup>12</sup> Man cannot abide in his pomp,  
he is like the beasts that perish.

Psalm 49

As we are dealing with a document from 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, which in archaeological terms isn't very old, we need to be aware that there are vast quantities of literature available from other cultures. Writing had become widespread and substances on which one wrote had improved and increased. It is not as if we are dealing with 1000 years BCE or 2000 years BCE when records and record keeping were poor.

A mere 300 years before the time of Jesus was born there is an abundance of written records among which we find documents with similarities to the writing of Koheleth.

I am not going to go through them all now because we should be here until tea time. I will put some of the more obvious ones on my website with links.

From Egypt there is the Insinger Papyrus which speaks of the hiddenness of God and the divine determination of fate

Onchsheshonqy we find the phrase about casting bread upon the waters with a promise of a profitable return.

From Babylon the Epic of Gilgamesh

Siduri's advice to Gilgamesh is that he enjoy his wife, fine clothes and tasty food. This resembles Koheleth's positive advice

The Epic also deals with life's ephemerality, the importance of one's name and the memory of a person after death

These also are significant

"I will praise the Lord of Wisdom"

Babylonian Theodicy

Dialogue between a master and his slave.

## How does the book work?

There are many theories about how to divide up the book. I will suggest one and that can be your sort of starting block. Have a look at it , modify it and then draft your own.

As a suggestion:-

Prologue 1:1 and Epilogue 12:9-14

A beginning and concluding thematic statement “vanity of vanities, all is vanity” 1:2-3 12:8

Two poems 1:4-11 11:7 – 12:8 – one at the beginning and one at the end.

Inside this frame the book divides into two halves

1<sup>st</sup> half 1:12-6:12 picks up on the thematic statement in 1:2-3 and develops it with a refrain that repeats 7 times

“All is vanity and a seeking after wind”

1:14, 2:11, 2:17, 2:26, 4:4, 4:16 and 6:9

2<sup>nd</sup> half 7:11-11:6 extends Koheleth’s search for what is “good” in life with another set of repeating refrains

“cannot find out/who can find out”

7:14, 7:23, 8:1, 8:7, 8:16 and

“do not know”/“no knowledge”

9:1, 9:5, 9:10, 10:14, 10:15, 11:2, 11:5, 11:6

There are other key elements in the book – perhaps the most significant is the thing that Koheleth feels most positive about

“There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil.”

which repeats 7 times 2:24-6, 3:12-13, 3:22, 5:18-20, 8:14-15, 9:7-10, 11:7-12:1

I have set out the book in this way to try and demonstrate that this is not a disorganised ramble through a number of themes, but a highly structured, carefully organised piece of literature. I wonder if we have behind this book a sort of philosophical school which existed in Jerusalem, patronised by the upper classes of Hebrew society. Fine oils and fine living.

“Let your garments be always white; let not oil be lacking on your head.” 9:8.

## The purpose of the book of Ecclesiastes

When we first looked at the structure of the Old Testament course here at NCCL, we felt that studies in wisdom literature were important and my colleague jumped in by saying “I will deal with the optimists” – he meant in particular the Book of Proverbs. So I decided to opt for what, in a moment of thoughtlessness I called “the grumblers” Job and Koheleth.

I think I rather regret referring to Koheleth as “a grumbler” because I think the charge is unjustified. What we have here is a highly structured intellectual literary enquiry into the whole of human life, the world, the *cosmos* and even God. That is a massive undertaking. He looks at all things and deduces time and again that “All is vanity” – this is a recurring theme of the book.

We need to look at this term Vanity, but let’s just pause for a moment on the word “all” I have just said that I think the author looks at “all things”

**The word “all”** (kol) in Hebrew occurs 91 times in Koheleth that is in 41% of the 222 verses. Bear in mind the book only has 12 chapters. In Job with 42 chapters kol occurs 73 times. Koheleth’s objective I would suggest is to explore the totality of life, everything that happens “Under the sun” a phrase that repeats itself 29 times in the book. It is a pursuit of knowledge and understanding about human existence that exceeds everything else in Israel’s wisdom tradition. Even God, whose realm is in heaven and whose ways defy human understanding is a subject of Koheleth’s intellectual enquiry.

## **Vanity**

In our English versions we have the term “Vanity” in Hebrew *hebel*. The word itself connotes vapour or breath. In Ecclesiastes it has two nuances:

1. Temporal ( meaning something which is ephemeral)
2. Existential ( meaning futile or absurd)

1 In the first we see the name Abel – The Greeks translated the word *atmis* or *atmos* (from which we get our English word atmosphere). Wind, vapour, breath or smoke are very insubstantial things from one perspective. Nevertheless they are very real, even if you cannot take hold of them. Koheleth sometimes uses the word in this way.

2 St Jerome, the designer of the Latin version of the Bible known as the Vulgate opted for the second meaning and rendered the Hebrew with the Latin word *vanitas*. Usually but not exclusively is the way in which Koheleth applies the term to life.

Repetition of a term – we do it in English “never ever go there”, “go to the very very top” “That’s a complete no no!” Hebrew does it as well, but as a way of expressing the superlative “vanity of vanities” – if you think about it there are others – “The song of songs”, *sheme hashshamayim*, “the highest of heavens”, “the holy of holies.”

Throughout the book Koheleth reminds his readers that things in life are ephemeral - present at one moment but gone the next. Even if one has the unlimited resources of a king, and is able to build houses and plant vineyards.

“I made great works; I built houses and planted vineyards for myself; <sup>5</sup> I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. <sup>6</sup> I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. <sup>7</sup> I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house; I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. <sup>8</sup> I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces; I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines,<sup>[c]</sup> man’s delight.

<sup>9</sup> So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem; also my wisdom remained with me. <sup>10</sup> And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. <sup>11</sup> Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and **behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind**, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.” 2:4ff

He considers the achievements he has managed in life – they provide a great incentive for humans. Surely thinks Koheleth that is substantial

<sup>18</sup>” I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me; <sup>19</sup> and who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. **This also is vanity.” 2:19**

As a result of this Koheleth concludes that we must enjoy what we can – and so one has these bursts of enthusiasm about the value of eating, drinking and having a good time.

**FATE** represented in this way **מִקְרָה**

Which is more of a phrase than a noun.

In chapter 2:14 I think we have another phrase which is a key to understanding the way in which Koheleth’s mind works,

“Then I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness. <sup>14</sup> The wise man has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness; and yet I perceived that one **fate** comes to all of them.” 2:14

The phrase fate is found in other Old Testament books, but not to any great extent, In Greek thinking it came to be a very dominant issue. I don’t think it has quite reached that here it is only used 10 times in the Old Testament and 7 of those occurrences are in this book. It conveys the idea that things happen to people over which they have no control. It is impossible to know in advance what will occur; hence it matters little what one does.

It is better to be wise than foolish, even if wisdom is always beyond one’s grasp 7:24 “I said, “I will be wise”; but it was far from me. <sup>24</sup> That which is, is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?”

But if ultimately what happens to one happens to the other also, then why expend the effort? 9:1-3 “It is better to righteous than to be wicked, but the same fate comes to both.

Everything before them is vanity,<sup>[m]</sup> <sup>2</sup> since one fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil,<sup>[n]</sup> to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice. As is the good man, so is the sinner; and he who swears is as he who shuns an oath. <sup>3</sup> This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that one fate comes to all;”

If one’s behaviour has no bearing on the way in which God treats people, then isn’t compromise better than adhering to a principle?

Not surprisingly Koheleth counsels a middle course

“Be not righteous overmuch, and do not make yourself overwise; why should you destroy yourself? <sup>17</sup> Be not wicked overmuch, neither be a fool; why should you die before your time?” 7:16

Chance not choice determines what happens in life.

He concludes

“This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that one fate comes to all.” 9:3

## Joy

Seven times in the book Koheleth advocates that the readers make the most of the day. In these he recommends the potential for joy in four things, labour, eating and drinking, love and youth. He examines the joy that people may create for themselves out of their own resources by building, planting and acquiring possessions, but concludes that their only dividend is to leave people asking the question “What use is it?” (2:2).

He commends instead the simple pleasures of life, essential aspects of conviviality and pleasure that have nothing to do with earned gain or profit (2:24, 3:13, 3:22, 5:18, 8:15) sufficient bread, clothes and wine make life worth living.

Having someone to love increases joy by adding companionship for “all the days of your vain life which he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun.” 9:9

Old age, that precursor of death, stalks life relentlessly, grinding away at every joy God grants, so the time to maximise pleasure is when one is young and the consequences for following “the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes” 11:9 are too distant to matter.

Koheleth’s treatment of this subject is interesting. On the one hand he sees joy as a gift an opportunity for freedom from the everyday grind – a compensation for all that is difficult unchangeable and all that cannot be reconciled in life.

On the other hand he concedes that the gift of joy is no more than an anaesthetic that masks the pain of life.

## **God**

I think it is traditional to say that the book of Ecclesiastes was included in the Old Testament because of its assumed association with King Solomon. However to turn the question on its head one might ask why the book should not be included in the canon of the Old Testament, because Koheleth’s beliefs about God are fundamental to the work.

Grumbler, he may or may not be, but challenger of God’s very existence, he is not. He does not go down the same road as Job.

It is true that the author does not recite the historical creeds of the past, nor does he recite at length the legend of salvation history with reminders either of how God brought the people out of Egypt, or how God seeks a return to Zion.

Historical facts and messianic hopes are missing. Instead we have an author who has much to say about God, “the God.” You may find that rather a strange comment “God” or “The God” but it corresponds with what Koheleth tells us. In the book, the personal name for God represented in Hebrew by the Tetragrammaton YHWH not spoken by Jews, but transmitted in the Gentile world as Yahweh or Jehovah, is totally missing. Instead in the 40 times he mentions God the author uses the generic version Elohim.

Koheleth never doubts the actual existence of God, although he admits that he is hidden. . God is the creator of all that there is. He gives to men wisdom, knowledge, work to do, wealth and possessions to enjoy.

God gives wealth, possessions, and honour, so that he lacks nothing of all that he desires, (6:2)

In response to this the author suggests that a person should be joyful in times of prosperity and in times of trouble or hardship should remember that God has made the one as well as the other.

“In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider; God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him.” (7:14)

In this respect I doubt if thoughts such as these would have gone down well with the author of the book of Job. Koheleth doesn’t question God regarding the violence and oppression on the world. He says that no one should be surprised at such things.

<sup>8</sup>“If you see in a province the poor oppressed and justice and right violently taken away, do not be amazed at the matter.” 5:8

He indicates that to question God in much the way Job wanted to do is futile.

Consider the work of God;

“who can make straight what he has made crooked?” 7:13

Koheleth never prays to God, sacrifices or makes a vow, indeed he urges caution to those who do so.

“Guard your steps when you go to the house of God; to draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools; for they do not know that they are doing evil. <sup>1</sup>Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God” 5:1

We do not find in the book of Ecclesiastes the well-trying phrase about “the fear of the Lord.” But he urges fear when in the presence of the deity.

“I know that whatever God does endures for ever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has made it so, in order that men should fear before him.” 3:14.

The fear described by Koheleth is not always an awe that describes mere splendour, but something which may evoke a variety of responses, from joy and trust to reverence and terror.

“Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him; <sup>13</sup> but it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God.”

(8:12)

“Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man.” (12:13)

## Two Poems by Koheleth

### Poem about Time (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 15)

Ancient sages believed that there was a right time and a wrong time for everything in life and they devoted considerable energy to try and discover how this worked and what the logic behind it was.

Koheleth agrees that everything has its own moment but insists that humans cannot know the scheme behind it because God withholds the information.

To fight against this control is useless.

There are two key words here

Season זמן *zeman* only occurs in late Hebrew Nehemiah 2::6 Esther 9:27 and Sirach 43:7. It is probably a loan word from Aramaic.

Time עת *eth* this is time when something happens rather than an absolute idea of time in a metaphysical sense.

When we look at this passage I suspect we feel that where we have a picture of the ordered harmony of human affairs. To a certain extent that is a very Greek way of looking at the passage – that within the concept of the *cosmos* there should be order and balance.

I suspect however that the Hebrew way of looking at these 14 antitheses is to see them not as opposites but rather the poles which suggest the idea of totality

We may see it in Isaiah 45:7

“I form light and create darkness  
I make weal and create woe.”

Jeremiah 1:10

“See I have set you over nations and kingdoms  
to pluck up and to break down  
to destroy and overthrow.”

The details of the poem are fairly self-explanatory – a mixture of emotions and human activity.

Casting away and gathering stones has perplexed some commentators. In some Hebrew commentaries it was suggested that the reference may be to when a person should or should not have sexual intercourse.

Similarly the rending and sewing of garments may refer to the making of tears on clothes during mourning.

“He has made everything beautiful in its time; also he has put eternity into man’s mind, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.” 3:11

The words eternity and mind are worthy of consideration.

The easy one is “mind” which in Hebrew would be read “heart” the seat of all emotions.

The translation “eternity” Hebrew עולם *olam* seems straightforward.

Robert Gordis translates this phrase as “the love of the world into men’s hearts”

Another suggestion is that by repointing the Hebrew from *olam* to *elem* we should get

“He has put ignorance into man’s heart

So that man cannot find it out.”

That actually is very interesting because there is a similar saying in Egyptian source The Instructions of Ptah Hotep

And an inscription that appears on a tomb of Petosiris (was the high priest of Thoth at Hermopolis)

There is no one who knows when the day of death will come

It is God who makes the heart forgetful!”

### **Poem about youth and old age**

This is a very famous poem which achieved great popularity during the late Victorian period in the UK. You may still see items of embroidery carefully worked with the words – to be hung, no doubt, in a young person’s bedroom and I have the quotation as a large piece of decorated calligraphy, carefully worked by one J Freeman and dated 1867.

The composer Charles H Steggall wrote the Anthem (now thankfully rarely performed) "Remember now they creator in the days of thy youth."

The poem contains comparisons between youthful vigour and incapacity of old age that winds up in death. As with all of Koheleth's work, and I think he wrote this, I don't believe he lifted it from elsewhere, there are some wonderful symbolic contrasts. The image of light representing youth and darkness which accompanies old age and there are contrasting verbs to rejoice and to remember.

The young man should rejoice, but there are warnings too and finally the sobering reflection that all these things are vanity.

I find the imagery is somewhat confusing

There are human and non-human scenes.

In the first 7 verses it is not always clear when one is to understand the text literally and when the expressions are figurative.

No one picture predominates from beginning to end

Sun, moon and stars

Clouds and rain

Imagery drawn from a house,

Almond tree and the grasshopper

Silver cord is snapped

Golden bowl is broken

Pitcher broken at the wheel

That the last three refer to death seems clear and a good commentary will make suggestions about the nature of the imagery. I think they are only suggestions because essentially no one can be sure what is meant by each idea.

Some years ago it was suggested that the poem was an allegory and while this is possible, I am not sure anyone has come up with precise explanations about each item in the poem.

### **Is there a Christian message here?**

In many respects this is quite difficult. The book contains no prophecies that might be interpreted as Messianic, there is no vision of the coming kingdom of God.

For many Christians and indeed commentators of the book in the late Jewish faith, the absence of a belief in life after death seems to have caused a problem.

The writer of the Deuterocanonical book of the Wisdom of Solomon includes quotations from the book of Ecclesiastes and describes them as dangerous and subversive opinions written by apostate Jews. So the ride is going to be bumpy

I think in a sense Christian mysticism may well value the imagery of God who in the last resort is unfathomable, but whose actions may clearly be seen in our lives and in the world.

I personally value Koheleth's sense of enjoyment in life. As a child I was aware of a form of Christianity which was hedged around by "thou shalt nots..."

Thou shalt not eat meat on Fridays or play in the street on a Sunday.

Far from being a grumbler, I see Koheleth as a liberator who encourages whatever enjoyment there may be.

That first poem in chapter 3 always seems to contain useful lessons with its emphasis on the right time. Perhaps I am unusual but I think we do live our lives according to this principle. Perhaps because we are nostalgic creatures we tend to hang on to things aware that society has moved, has changed. A time to be born and a time to die. A careful examination of this chapter would, I am sure provide many valuable lessons for us all.

There are teachings here about judgement and the future, about the value of friends, the need for humility and being content with what we have, the importance of taking life as it comes, while being aware that somehow behind all the frustrations of this temporal world, there is an unseen and virtually unfathomable God.

I think in the book of Ecclesiastes there are lessons for Christians, but perhaps not a message for Christians.

As I am sure you are aware. There is a specific lesson for us here today in Norwich Cathedral.

“Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.”