

Getting in the mood 01-01-2023

I presume that you have noticed that the "Good Book" is quite a difficult read. How wonderful it would be if we could just open it up, randomly, let chance decide, and find words of wisdom for you as if these words had been written just for you! We talk about "the Word of God" as if "our God" had got out his dictation machine and had decided to send "Person X" in Ormond, a personal message. Well, maybe that is how it works for you. Maybe not. Maybe sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't.

The framers of the Lectionary have presented to us for our consideration two texts that are challenges to our ideas of what scripture should say. If we want to hear God's word in these texts we will have to put a bit of effort in. Let's start with the extract from Ecclesiastes. When was it written? Probably around 450 BCE - maybe during, or after, the rebuilding of Jerusalem. Who wrote it? A writer we identify as Koholet. We know his name, that's all. He is considered to be a wise man - and what he has written is classified by Jews and us Christians alike as "wisdom." And what does this wisdom amount to? Well, pretty much this: there are good times and bad times. There are joys and sorrows. There are ups and downs. That's it! That's life! If you are lucky it won't get worse. If you are lucky the good will outweigh the bad.

Will God sort it out and make good triumph over bad? Koholet has little to say about that. Koholet is more of a philosopher than a prophet.

However in Chapter 3 he does venture this opinion:

16 Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, wickedness was there, and in the place of righteousness, wickedness was there as well. 17 I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for he has appointed a time for every matter, and for every work. 18 I said in my heart with regard to human beings that God is testing them to show that they are but animals. 19 For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity.

And this is preceded by the Koholet's famous poem:

*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
2 a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
3 a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
4 a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
5 a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
6 a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;
7 a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
8 a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.*

<https://youtu.be/CCAM3D2bYOQ>

Is his book worth reading - absolutely! Will we learn from it? Yes!

The other passage set for our consideration this day is from the book of Revelation. We know (or think we know) the author (John of Patmos) and that he wrote some six hundred years after Koholet. He is the same man as John the Evangelist - a man with a mystical bent and inclined to visions. He wrote around fifty years after the crucifixion, and thirty years after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans.

Koholet wrote during a time of rebuilding. John wrote at in a time of dispersal. The Jews would not gather again as a nation in this place for close on two thousand years. Koholet wrote at a time when hope seemed possible. John wrote at a time when all seemed lost.

And so to John's fantastic vision. If we search in vain for a sign of God in Koholet's philosophy we are compensated in full by John's vision. None of this "life sucks, make the best of it" philosophising. Now a vision of God's taking control. Jerusalem will be rebuilt (again) - in better shape than before.

21 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

*'See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
4 he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.'*

5 And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.' Also he said, 'Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.' 6 Then he said to me, 'It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.'

Death and disaster will be overcome. Life will triumph. God will have the final word.

Of course, these two passages were never meant to be read together. The times and the motivations were different. And our times are different to. The mood of our time is different. Yes, like the people of Koholet's time and the people of John's time, we are survivors. We have a choice to reflect on our time's ups and downs - shrug and say "that's life!" - or to hope for a better deal.

We have survived two world wars. We have survived the threat of nuclear war - so far. We live under the threat of Covid-19. It hasn't gone away. Racial tensions are rising. Home, for many women, is a place of danger and fear. And climate change threatens an end to life as we know it - soon too.

Is this a time for Koholet's "make the best of it" philosophy? Or, is it a time to hope for an intervention from beyond? We do need a goodly dose of Koholet's realism to see things as they are — the dark side and the bright side. We also need a goodly serving of vision, because we may have reached the point of no return - where there is no sense in going on with life as usual. Now is a time for new life - or should I say, new lifestyle - new priorities, new values, new relationships, new dreams, new communities, new values.

Is it time for Koholet's good common sense? Yes, but not in a Pollyanna-ish sort of way. We can't wish the bad stuff away. We have to deal with it. Is it time for a grand vision of the coming of a New Jerusalem? Yes, because the wreckage of the Jerusalems we have built are lying at our feet and we need to dare to hope for a new beginning.

Koholet asserts that there is nothing new under the sun. John reports God as saying "Behold I make all things new". God knows, we could use a bit of renewal.

May it be so.