

18<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time, C – August 4, 2019 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.  
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 700 words

Our readings this Sunday include a cameo appearance of the very interesting Book of Ecclesiastes – the only passage from it in the three-year cycle of Sunday and Holy Day readings. Qoheleth, as the protagonist in the book is named, is a rather pessimistic soul. “Vanity of vanities”, he complains seemingly incessantly, concluding about many things that “this also is vanity” – and sometimes adding, “and a great misfortune”. Let’s call it “pessimism with a certain charm”, for this book has long been a favorite of many and certainly has its appeal.

The root of Qoheleth’s pessimism is a view that ends with this world. Here, he acknowledges, we may experience joy, sadness, wealth, poverty, happiness, and toil. But all of that seems to end at death. It all appears to be for nothing. Death is the great leveler, but not in the exact sense we normally say that: because for Qoheleth, all share the same outcome. Thus his frequent conclusions about the vanity of life. But this is not what Christians believe. Therefore, what purpose does this book of the Bible really serve? How can we learn from it?

One approach is to consider it in its scriptural context. God’s revelation is not yet complete in the Old Testament; it will only become so in the revelation of Jesus Christ, as recorded by the writers of the New Testament. In this regard, we can see the Book of Ecclesiastes as sort of the “bad news before the good news”.<sup>1</sup> The bad news that Qoheleth preaches is that all things are vain – he brings us to the brink of despair. But this prepares us to appreciate all the more the good news of the hope of eternal life that Jesus Christ gives.

If we place ourselves in the shoes of the Jewish people, who waited for the Messiah for centuries, we might more readily appreciate this interpretation. After a while, one begins to wonder if the promise was really true – and for some, this leads to despondency. But then, Christ finally comes to raise us from despair and open the way to eternal life. Thus St. Paul preached in the second reading, “If you were raised with Christ, seek what is above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Think of what is above, not of what is on earth.”

We are thus challenged to see our lives in the proper light. Qoheleth did not yet know about heaven, about the reward for the good. But we do. God calls us to live in the light of eternity and to order our lives toward that. And the warning of the gospel parable can aid in focusing us very quickly on this point: “This night your life will be demanded of you.” Imagine if those words were spoken to us now! Would we be found unprepared, living on the wrong trajectory, living as if this world were our final home? Or are we on the right path?

The psalms are the Church’s great treasury of prayer, and this week’s psalm gives voice especially to these considerations: “Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain wisdom of heart.... And may the gracious care of the Lord be ours.” There is an urgency to getting our affairs in the proper order. For they could all turn out to have been “vanity and a great misfortune” if we are not found ready when our lives are demanded of us. But the verse of the psalm response also gives us confidence: “If *today* you hear his voice...”

Yes, every day is a “new today”, a new chance to turn to God. Pessimism may indeed have its charms but is never necessary in the spiritual life. Each waking moment is an opportunity to serve Christ. Even a person who dedicated the majority of his days on earth to vanity still has a chance, so long as he has the breath of life. But let neither him nor us procrastinate on that. The gospel reminds us of the urgency. We must turn to God today and ask him to soften our hearts and order our days aright. Then we shall prove Qoheleth wrong.

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<sup>1</sup> See *The Sacred Page*, “A Church of the Poor: Readings for the 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday in OT”,  
<http://www.thesacredpage.com/2019/07/a-church-of-poor-readings-for-18th.html>, accessed 8/3/19.