

BIBLICAL RESOURCES

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 2:21-23; Psalm 90 [89] or 95 [94]; Col 3:1-5; Luke 12:13-21

So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God

Luke 12:13 Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.”
14 But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?”
15 And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

16 Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly.
17 And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’
18 Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.’
19 And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’
20 But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’
21 So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The Parable of the Rich Fool is found only in Luke’s Gospel and reflects the author’s intense interest in our attitudes to money and possessions. The whole section 12:13-40 should be read for a full picture. A few statistics can serve to illustrate this interest of Luke:

Poor/poverty: 5-5-**10+0**
(=Matthew—Mark—**Luke+Acts**)

Inheritance: 1-1-**2+2**
Possessions: 3-0-**14+14**
Rich: 3-2-**11-0**
Land: 3-4-**9+8**
Fool: 0-0-**2-0**
To be rich: 0-0-**2+0**



KIND OF WRITING

The excerpt begins with a very short anecdote, which provides the occasion for the parable. The parable itself lacks the destabilising effect of the authentic Jesus tradition, so there is no real puzzle or paradox to figure out. In its place, we have a wisdom teaching. The best commentary on the text will be further citations from Luke, as we shall see, where the same theme recurs.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Lord, let me know my end, and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is. You have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing in your sight. Surely everyone stands as a mere breath. Surely everyone goes about like a shadow. Surely for nothing they are in turmoil; they heap up, and do not know who will gather. (Psalms 39:4-6)

I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me — and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labours under the sun, because sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be en-

Thought for the day

If any lesson were to be learned from times of recession, surely it would resemble today’s Gospel. Riches *are* precarious; material security *is* unstable; dreams of untroubled longevity *are* soon dispelled by “events.” Paradoxically, our experience of life as fickle can take us in quite opposite directions. We might be tempted to plunge ourselves into more enjoyment of the present moment, as St Paul caustically observes: “let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.” (1Corinthians 15:32 NET) The road less travelled is to become “rich towards God.” It still means enjoying and living the present moment, but in a completely different, deeper and ultimately more lasting way.

Prayer

God of wisdom, help us to see through all that is false yet enticing; be our guide on the path of life.

joyed by another who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity. (Ecclesiastes 2:18-23)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.” (Luke 4:16-19)

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate

lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.' He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house—for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.' Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.' He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'" (Luke 16:19–31)

When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich (Luke 18:22–24).

ST PAUL

I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something—now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a ques-

tion of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written, "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little." (2Corinthians 8:8–15)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 13 Another example of two brothers / sons / characters in contrast or turmoil. It was expected that a respected teacher would be able to interpret inheritance laws. The man acts like Martha, who tried to get Jesus to intervene or rather interfere. The real problem lies in the attitude to the inheritance.

Verse 14 Friend (lit. "man") can be positive or negative (Luke 5:20; 12:14; 22:58, 60), depending on the context. It feels bit negative here.

Verse 15 The verses which follow sustain this teaching: *He said to his disciples, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest* (Luke 12:22–27)

Verse 16 The flourishing is quickly described to get to the main point.

Verse 17 Nothing exceeds like excess. The preening self-satisfaction rings alarm bells. It reminds one of the proverb "pride comes before a fall."

Verse 18 Cf. the story of the rich man and Lazarus, cited above, where the same confidence in the permanence of riches led Dives astray.

Verse 19 The sheer complacency here is the problem. Cf. *Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it.* (Luke 17:33) Cf. *So I commend enjoyment, for there is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat, and drink, and enjoy themselves, for this will go with them in their toil through the days of life that God gives them under the sun.* (Ecclesiastes 8:15) A similar thought is dismissed by Paul: *If with merely human hopes I fought with wild animals at Ephesus, what would I have gained by it? If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."* (1Corinthians 15:32)

Verse 20 Fools ignore God and reality: *Fools say in their hearts, "There is no God." They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is no one who does good. (Psalms 14:1) When we look at the wise, they die; fool and dolt perish together and leave their wealth to others.* (Psalms 49:10)

Verse 21 To be "rich towards God" echoes a significant Pauline usage: *The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.* (Romans 6:10–11) *For through the law I died to the law so that I may live to God. I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So the life I now live in the body, I live because of the faithfulness of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.* (Galatians 2:19–21 NET).

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. "One's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions", said Jesus. What have you found by experience to be more important in life than possessions? What brought this home to you?

2. "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed". Perhaps you have seen how greed can lead to trouble in public life, in family life, and in the personal life of individuals. What has helped you to guard against greed? What benefits have you experienced when you were less greedy?

3. The message of the parable could be summed up in saying, "If you want to give God a laugh, tell him your plans". Life takes many twists and turns we do not anticipate. When have you found that have had to change your plans because of unexpected circumstances? What has helped you to be flexible and resourceful at such times?

PRAYER

O God, the giver of every gift that endures, only by your grace can we rightly understand the wonder of life and why it is given.

By the word of your Son challenge our foolishness, confront our greed, and shape our lives to the wisdom of the Gospel.

We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

Set your minds on things that are above, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God

Col 3:1 Therefore, if you have been raised with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Keep thinking about things above, not things on the earth, 3 for you have died and your life is hidden (*kekryptai*) with Christ in God. 4 When Christ (who is your life) appears (*phanerōthē*), then you too will be revealed (*phanerōthēsēsthe*) in glory with him.

5 So put to death whatever in your nature belongs to the earth: sexual immorality, impurity, shameful passion, evil desire, and greed which is idolatry. (NET)

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

For a change, the middle reading and the Gospel are closely linked. Both are against sleepwalking through life; both try to draw out the consequences of a new awareness of the brevity of life and the gifts of grace. How should we live?

KIND OF WRITING

Vv. 1-4 give us the worldview, in the light of which we should decide how to live as Christ-believers. Vv. 5-17 go on to give general principles and guidelines. Our lectionary excerpt confines itself to the very first verse of the exhortation.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

Some alternative version of the Gospel is leading at least some of the Colossians astray. While the hortatory sections in the Pauline and Deutero-Pauline letters can be of general import, in our case the issues raised seem to be close to the reality of Colossae. In addition, a somewhat general exhortation has been strongly “Christianised” by the author, so that the motivation is clearly focused on Christ. Something of the traditional Pauline “already/not yet” has been resolved in the direction of already. This seems to reflect the context in Colossae.

RELATED PASSAGES

Having been buried with him in baptism, you also have been raised with him through your faith in the power of God who raised him from the dead (Colossians 2:12 NET)

Their end is destruction, their god is the

belly, they exult in their shame, and they think about earthly things. (Philippians 3:19 NET)

Even though they have the appearance of wisdom with their self-imposed worship and false humility achieved by an unsparing treatment of the body—a wisdom with no true value—they in reality result in fleshly indulgence. (Colossians 2:23 NET)

And we all, with unveiled faces reflecting the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another, which is from the Lord, who is the Spirit. (2Corinthians 3:18 NET)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 Christ’s death without the resurrection would be simply a tragedy; his resurrection without the cross would not speak to our human condition. Both are needed and so Col 2:12 (above) is vital. Although these verses function as an introduction to moral teaching, the ground for that moral teaching is not simply (negative) imperatives but rather the great “indicative” of Christ’s resurrection (cf. Ps 110:1 and Dan 7:9-14). “Above” manages to combine Jewish apocalyptic with Greek philosophy. (It is too early to think of a Gnostic dimension). “Keep seeing” (NET) is a good translation of the present imperative, capturing the urgent dedication required and is rather better than that JB’s “you must look” in the lectionary.

Verse 2 This verse really repeats v. 1 for emphasis. Again, “keep thinking” is good, as long as we remember the nuance of the verb: “to have a settled way of understanding, to hold an opinion, to maintain an attitude.” It is rather deeper than merely having a (passing?) thought. Cf. Phil 3:19 above. At this point, the writer is addressing directly the Colossian “heresy”: *Even though they have the appearance of wisdom with their self-imposed worship and false humility achieved by an unsparing treatment of the body—a wisdom with no true value—they in reality result in fleshly indulgence.* (Colossians 2:23 NET)

Verse 3 It must always be a surprise to be told that you have died! Cf. Col 2:20 above. Hidden is an apocalyptic term,

meaning hidden in Christ and invisible to those not yet enlightened by the faith. Thus, the focus is really on the hiddenness of Christ. For echoes from Paul himself, see Rom. 6:4, 10–11; 14:8; 2 Cor. 4:10–12; 5:15; 13:4; Gal. 2:19–20 and Phil. 1:21.

Verse 4 In effect, the writer is saying that the fidelity of the Colossians will be vindicated at the Second Coming. Therefore, they should not lose heart or be led astray. A pronoun (he) would have been stylistically better at this point but the emphasis falls firmly on Christ (named four times in these four verses). Christ is our life, in contrast to Adam who used to be our life. Cf. 2 Cor 3:18 above. In Greek, the same verb is used of both Christ and the believer (*phaneroō*).

Verse 5 On the foundation of the indicative (theology), vv. 5-17 offer exhortation (morality) in the imperative. The *Revised Common Lectionary* (C. of I.) does rather better here extending the reading to v. 11. The verb “to put to death” is rare in the New Testament. The nuance seems to be taken from the human experience of the gradual atrophy of the body due to sickness or old age. Cf. Rom 4:19 and 2 Cor 4:10. In some fashion, normal bodily functioning has ceased. “Whatever in your nature” translates the Greek “body members” but the meaning is extended to mean whatever in me, both physical and metaphorical. Although those who disturbed the Colossians probably overstated the need for bodily discipline, the writer is not against it in principle. The list is very Jewish with its emphasis on sexuality immorality (always shocking to Jews) and idolatry. Such lists abound in the New Testament and invite a concrete and personal response.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. As I try to live a good life, what is my inspiration and motivation?
2. Part of who I am as a Christ-believer is hidden not only from others but even from myself—as a find myself “taken hold of” by Christ.
3. What do I do in my ordinary life to “keep seeking the things that are above”?

PRAYER

God of every grace, in Christ you have taken hold of us and our true life is hidden with Christ in you. Help us to hold this truth in our hearts and minds as we walk the everyday path of discipleship.

What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil?

Ecc 1:1 *The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.* 1:2 Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

Ecc 2:20 *So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labours under the sun,* 21 because sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. 22 What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? 23 For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity. (NRSV)

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth) is a surprise in the Bible: it is philosophical, even existential, and pessimistic. One of its enduring attractions is that it is very close to experience and tells it like it is.

A translation hurdle is the word vanity. This traditional rendering has lost its original meaning of emptiness and now means only some kind of narcissism. Below are less traditional translations which are much more accurate for today's ears.

NJB Version

Sheer futility, Qoheleth says. Sheer futility: everything is futile! (Ecclesiastes 1:2)

JPS Version

Utter futility! — said Koheleth — Utter futility! All is futile! (Ecclesiastes 1:2)

NABRE Version

Vanity of vanities, says Qoheleth, vanity of vanities! All things are vanity! (Ecclesiastes 1:2)

A few extra verses not given in the reading have been added above.

KIND OF WRITING

This is wisdom literature, part of the international wisdom writings found in the Ancient Near East. These writings are frequently marked by reflection on universal human experiences and by a lack of interest in Israelite history (they are exceptions). Usually, there is a fascination with nature and often wisdom is portrayed as a woman.

Qoheleth is exceptional in its existential pessimism. In Jewish tradition, it was held that Solomon wrote the Song of Songs when he was young and lusty, the book Proverbs in middle age and Qoheleth as a disillusioned old man.

Closeness to experience is a great strength of the book, as the writer brings to frank expression our hidden feelings of futility.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Qoheleth means “one who calls an assembly”, rendered by way of the Greek into English as Ecclesiastes. Ekklesia means simply an assembly. In the NRSV it is translated as teacher but other versions choose preacher. Neither is quite right but it is hard to find a word in English.

Title (1:1)

Frame (1:2)

Corpus (1:3–12:7)

Frame (12:8)

Epilogue (12:9–11)

Within that somewhat external structure, sections can be identified:

1:2–3—Frame 1:4:11—Cosmology 1:12–3:15—Anthropology 3:16–4:16—Critique of society I 5:1–7—Critique of religion 5:8–6:10—Critique of society II 6:11–9:6—Critique of prevailing wisdom 9:7–12:7—Ethics 12:8 Frame.

Our reading comes the first frame and the section named anthropology.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Then I considered all the skilful work that is done: Surely it is nothing more than competition between one person and another. This also is profitless—like chasing the wind. The fool folds his hands and does no work, so he has nothing to eat but his own flesh. Better is one handful with some rest than two hands full of toil and chasing the wind.

So I again considered another futile thing on earth: A man who is all alone with no companion, he has no children nor siblings; yet there is no end to all his toil, and he is never satisfied with riches. He laments, “For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?” This also is futile and a burdensome task! (Ecclesiastes 4:4–8 NET)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 The book is attributed to Solomon, the ideal wise king in Israelite tradition. In spite of the setting of monarchy, there is a clear democratisation of wisdom: how can any person be a ruler in his / her own life?

Verse 2 The meaning of the Hebrew *hebel* is literally warm breath or vapour. It is a metaphor for life as utterly insubstantial and ephemeral. The form “x of x” constitutes the superlative. Futility of futilities = the most futile. The repetition is emphatic and the closing phrase universal, for all futile.

Verse 20 Turning to etc. means giving full attention and consideration to. Surprisingly, this is the single use of the word despair in Qoheleth. Labours means hard, physical work. Under the sun means universally, everywhere.

Version 21 Elsewhere in the book (see above 4:4–8), it is noted that material gains are often enjoyed by others. The writer, surely a seeker of wisdom, has learned that the same is true even of wisdom, knowledge and skill. Others who expended no sweat come into the achievements of the dead. This is not only “vanity” but great evil (a feeling?!).

Verse 22 Qoheleth often proceeds by asking pointed questions. See 1:3, 2:2, 12; 2:22; 3:9, 22; 5:11, 16; 6:8, 12; 7:13. Such questions manage to be both engaging and tired! Note reference to all and under the sun.

Verse 23 The JPS version captures the spirit of this verse as follows: All his days his thoughts are grief and heartache, and even at night his mind has no respite. That too is futile! (Ecclesiastes 2:23)

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Sometimes, we do suspect that what we do is pointless and that life is indeed absurd. Recall the last time this happened to you and how did you cope / respond.

2. Occasionally, we stumble across some genuine wise insight into what is truly of value. Can you name your deep values?

PRAYER

Teach us, faithful God, not to be satisfied with less but to aim for deep and lasting wisdom in our lives. We make our prayer through Jesus, your wisdom, who lives with you in the unity of the Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

THE LITURGY

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 2:21-23; Psalm 90 [89] or 95 [94]; Col 3:1-5; Luke 12:13-21

READINGS 1 AND 3

The first reading is a very good match for Gospel, which also illustrates the futility of trusting in riches.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 90 (89) makes a perfect response to Qoheleth, because it does bring the question of morality and potential futility into relation-ship with faith: Make us know the shortness of our life that we may gain wisdom of heart.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 2:21-23

We probably don't often think of the Bible and philosophy. Our first reading is from a very philosophical book, casting a cold eye of the futility of much that we do.

Second reading

Colossians 3:1-5

We are all baptised into Christ. If we find ourselves wondering what that might mean, our reading from Colossians might be a good place to start.

Gospel

Luke 12:13-21

Sometimes we need reminding of the plainest truth of our faith, such as life is not made secure by what we own. So what *does* make life secure?

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 5 August

Numbers 11:4-15

We hear the story of the manna in the desert, a story with a long resonance in the New Testament, as we see in today's Gospel. Perhaps even more interesting is the familiar, even cheeky way, in which Moses addresses God.

Matthew 14:13-21

The first reading goes well with Gospel today in which Jesus acts as the "new" Moses providing the new "manna", the Eucharist, our food for the journey.

Tuesday 6 August

The Transfiguration of the Lord



Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14

This may well be the most remembered part of Daniel. From it we get the expression Son of Man, used by Jesus as his own self-designation.

2 Peter 1:16-19

The Bible sometimes uses symbolic tales, of course, but the story of Jesus is grounded in history and in fact.

Luke 9:28-36

Luke changes the way he presents the Transfiguration. Firstly, he underlines the context of prayer. Secondly, he names the subject of the conversation—Jesus' death, which he called his "exodus."

Wednesday 7 August

Sts Sixtus II, pope and companions, martyrs

Numbers 13:1-2,25-14:1,26-29,34-35

In the grand story of the Exodus, the Israelites nearly got to the Holy Land immediately, but then meandered around it for forty years. This reading gives one explanation of why.

Matthew 15:21-28

The story of the Canaanite women (Syrophoenician in Mark) is found in Matthew and Mark but not in Luke. Probably by the time of Luke the inclusion of non-Jews in the movement was no longer an issue. It may well have been an issue for Matthew's community, aware that Jesus was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. This story "gives permission" to bring the Gospel beyond the frontiers of ethnic Judaism.

Thursday 8 August

St Dominic, priest and religious

Numbers 20:1-13

Anyone who has experienced the desert will immediately grasp what is at stake: water is life! Anyone who has taken the risk of significant change or journey will also identify with the feeling of looking back and asking "have I done the right thing?" At a deeper level, this is a story of "little faith", a story with a long resonance in the Old Testament (see Psalm 95). It triggered a powerful echo in John 7:37-39, where Jesus declares himself to be the source of living water.

Matthew 16:13-23

Our reading today combines the story of Caesarea Philippi (in all three Synoptic gospels) with the special role to Peter (only in Matthew). These are linked: Peter *can* be the rock to others on account of his own faith. It is likely that the promise to Peter reflects his post-Easter leadership in Antioch, where this Gospel was written.

Friday 9 August

St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, (Edith Stein) virgin and martyr

Hosea 2:16, 17, 21-22

The lectionary offers a powerful reading for the feast of Edith Stein, underlining the loving intimacy of God's call.

Matthew 25:1-13

Our reading—quite traditional for the feast of virgins—reminds us that there are some things others cannot do for us: making journey inward to the heart of God.

Saturday 10 August

St Laurence, deacon and martyr

2 Corinthians 9:6-10

Originally, this reading was about the collection for the Judean Christians, who were poor and under pressure. Paul's reflection on generosity in giving in general, however, is always up to date.

John 12:24-26

This short reading, also special for the feast, takes up an image from the parables of Jesus and applies it directly to the cost of discipleship *then* and *now*.