

A Reason for Being

Ecclesiastes

Georges Bernanos, a French author and priest wrote, “in order to have hope in what does *not* deceive, we must *lose* hope in everything that *does* deceive.” This aphorism could well be understood to sum up the purpose that the author of the biblical book ‘Ecclesiastes’ had in writing the work. When you read Ecclesiastes the one thing that stands out is that the author wrote with implacable realism about the human condition without ever falling into despair. I would like us to discover how the author managed this impressive feat.

Secular and religious people alike know that Ecclesiastes begins with the words, “vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” In scholarly circles there is some dispute as to whether the English word ‘vanity’ accurately captures the meaning of the Hebrew word *hebel*. Scholars have discovered that the original literal meaning of *hebel* was ‘vapour’ or ‘mist’. *Hebel*, these scholars hold, suggests the idea of uselessness. As a result of this discovery the New International Version (NIV) of the bible has Ecclesiastes begin: “Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.” Despite the NIV using the word ‘meaningless’ I think that we should stick with ‘vanity’. This is the case because ‘vanity’ means ‘without ultimate value’ and this notion is closer to what the author means. The word ‘vanity’ also suggests that our destiny is characterised by failure, and this is also an aspect of the author’s meaning.

Having begun by telling his readers that everything is vanity, the author goes on to give a list of things that are vain. But if we are to understand why Ecclesiastes holds that everything is vain we have to know what criterion its author uses to assess things. We tend to ask “*what* is a thing good for?” and then assess it in terms of whether it is useful or not. The author of Ecclesiastes, on the other hand, asks “*whom* is this thing good for?” When our author writes “what does man gain from his labor?” he is asking, ‘how does this or that thing make one more of a person and help us answer the questions raised by life?’ Using this question as the criterion by which to assess things, the author of Ecclesiastes goes on give a list of things that are vain. I will only discuss a few things on his list.

The first thing that he says is vain is our notion of progress. Our author writes that “the sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises.” What he means by this is that we are continually beginning over again. But what is the point of beginning something that is vain over and over again? But let us be clear here. Our author is not stupid. He knows that things change. There was innovation in the ancient world. The invention of the chariot, for example, revolutionised warfare. Agriculture and navigation changed the lives of people. But our author is not concerned with science or technology. He is concerned with humanity. His point is that despite our scientific and technological progress we *are* nothing more than we were. People today are no more intelligent than five thousand years ago. Nor are they more just or peaceable. We have not moved from an inferior to a superior stage! Genghis Khan killed with the sword, our way to kill is with guns and bombs, but the pattern of behaviour is the same. Our author’s point is, therefore, is that we should not delude ourselves that we have moved from a lower form of life to a higher form of life.

Ecclesiastes also lists work as something that is vanity. It is important to know that the author of Ecclesiastes writes as someone who has done great works; he is not writing as a poor person who resents the achievements of others. “I made”, he writes, “great works; I built houses and planted vineyards for myself; I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kind of fruit trees.” Yet these works are futile, the author argues, because “I must leave it to those who come after me - and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish.” If Karl Marx could have seen what Stalin did with his work he would have been appalled. Einstein was appalled by the outcome of the Manhattan Project that built on his work and produced the atomic bomb. Work, our author holds, is a necessity because it enables us to eat, but it does not satisfy the soul. His point is that it does not reveal answers to the deep questions of life. Furthermore, our author argues that, contrary to the way many people think, there is no causal relation between a person’s achievements and qualities. Everything just happens depending on the time, depending on chance. You cannot avoid bad and ruthless times crashing down on you if they do.

The author of Ecclesiastes goes on to list other things as being vain. These include power, money, possessions, and human answers. Basically, he holds, they all suffer from the same

defects as the idea of human progress and human work. Of course what relativizes everything we do is the inevitability of death. Thus the wise person dies as the fool dies, people die just as animals do. Everything is subject to the same insignificance.

What the author of Ecclesiastes does is progressively eliminate everything people thought they could cling to, everything that people thought gave meaning to their lives. One would think that this would be a recipe for despair. But the author does not fall into utter despair. Why not? To answer this question we have to remind ourselves that Ecclesiastes is a work that was included in the Hebrew bible. What we call the 'Old Testament' consists of various writings that were gathered together about two and half thousand years ago in order to bear witness to God. So the compilers saw Ecclesiastes as bearing witness to God. The author says God has put into the human heart the desire for 'eternity'. What this means, for our author, is that while everything is questioned, we know that futility is not the final word. This is what Ecclesiastes means by 'eternity'. The author does not mean by 'eternity' something that is unknown, that is some unknowable dimension that people cannot conceive of. Let me try to be a little clearer about this.

We have seen that for Ecclesiastes what spoils everything is death. This means that what is at the end taints the beginning and the middle with a tinge of nothingness. But it is God's purpose for humanity that we should live: life wants to live, not die. Life, according to Ecclesiastes, yearns for fulfilment but is incapable of attaining its fulfilment. Eternity for Ecclesiastes is, therefore, fulfilled life and only God can answer our desire for fulfilled life. For Christians this desire is fulfilled in Jesus Christ the embodied love and purpose of God. He is *the life* as the gospel of John puts it. The author of Ecclesiastes did not know of Christ, but he trusted in God's presence as ultimately being a righting of every situation. The final word our author leaves his readers with is that we should *remember*. We should grant God a place in our present memory, remembering that he is discreetly present in Christ Jesus.

We can end where we began with the quote from Bernanos, "in order to have hope in what does *not* deceive, we must *lose* hope in everything that *does* deceive." Ecclesiastes has exposed the things in which it is futile to put our hope. He has also directed our hope to the

time of God's presence. The time of God's presence is the time in which Christ Jesus is present in the life of the world. According to the Christian faith that presence is God's future for us impinging upon the world now. What this means is that the time of vanity is, even now, in the shadows, being tinged with the colour of God's time inaugurated by the risen crucified Christ. It is this that we should remember and value. It is this in which we should hope.

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