

Church of St Mary the Less, Durham

Pontus Bramberg

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Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer.

The mellifluous words of the Preacher that have been read this afternoon are begun by what is, at least arguably, the latter part of a of a series of short proverbs that itself began several verses earlier in the tenth chapter of the book bearing his name (the substance of which is formed almost entirely of an extended quotation of his words). A polyvalence characteristic of proverbs is evident in the first two verses of the eleventh chapter. The most literal interpretation might be to consider 'sending one's bread out upon the waters' as a reference to a commercial shipping venture. It is certainly the case, even today and much more so in the time of Ecclesiastes, that sea freight is unpredictable and relatively slow, hence 'after many days you will get it back'; it can take weeks or months before one's investment provides returns and, as with all investments, there is a risk that it is, whether wholly or in part, lost (in the case of sea freight, we do well to remember the likelihood that the ship and, most importantly, her crew may also perish). This is certainly an interesting perspective and one that I can appreciate, but the verse can also be read as an exhortation to almsgiving if it is considered in terms of giving one's material things to the needy even, and perhaps especially, when it seems to be as wasteful as throwing (an alternative translation of the Hebrew שָׁלַח (šal·lah), which the New Revised Standard Version renders as 'send out', is 'cast' or 'throw') bread upon the waters; this reading makes sense of the first part of the verse, which appears to imply a *promise*, rather than merely a *possibility*, of future reward. One could now consider the place of works of charity in the economy of salvation, but apparently time is limited so I will leave that very interesting topic for another time. The second verse is related to the first and has very similar meanings. If the first verse is read as sound business advice about deferred profit and calculated risk-taking, 'divide your means seven ways, or even eight' complements that advice and could also be rendered as 'do not put all your eggs in one basket'; risk-taking may be advantageous and even necessary, but it would clearly be unwise to risk one's entire fortune on one enterprise that is not guaranteed to be profitable (this is made more clear by the second part of the verse). If we instead consider the first verse as an admonition to give alms, this is an encouragement to share one's possessions liberally. This encouragement would not stand on its own in the Bible (the New Testament of course contains almost innumerable such exhortations but we can also find them in various Old Testament books, notably Proverbs and Isaiah).

Having received some of the Preacher's very good investment advice and hopefully having considered the more important admonition to charity, we move on to the end of a consistent theme of human ignorance which was begun in chapter 9 and continued throughout the tenth

chapter. The next four verses form the capstone of this theme, which in most English translations are rendered poetically (the Hebrew scholars in the congregation may have something to say about distinguishing Hebrew prose from poetry but I fear that discussing that in this preaching would be vanity), in their several affirmations of human ignorance. In the third verse, we are reminded of processes which, although they can to some extent be harnessed, controlled, or mitigated by human means (it is now even possible by chemical means to cause clouds to 'empty rain on the earth' before they are 'full'), will continue without human interference and which are not dependent on human knowledge or understanding. In verse four, ignorance is again pointed out and the reader is implicitly told to accept it. Ecclesiastes does not seem to care for those who wait for the 'perfect moment', probably because there is no such thing. He makes his observation in relation to waiting for perfect weather; although weather forecasting has made significant progress in the millennia since these words were written, many of us will no doubt have experienced weather other than forecasted. One could limit the application of these words to the weather and there is also a discussion to be had as to the appropriateness of even attempting to produce weather forecasts but it seems that this is missing the broader point of the Preacher's words: if one always waits for perfect circumstances, one will never act; it might be that one could draw a parallel to writing, especially of the academic kind, where the perfect is often the enemy of the good. There is probably no such thing as a perfect essay and the best essay is the one that actually gets written; of course the author of an essay has much more control over that essay than one generally has over the weather but if the point is that we must take action even when the circumstances are not perfect, it seems that the parallel holds insofar as essays must be written and submitted even if they will not be perfect. There are probably numerous other circumstances where this holds true and it is proper to keep this in mind because one otherwise risks doing nothing for fear of imperfection.

Verses five and six continue and end this theme of ignorance with examples of processes which we do not fully understand. Verse five speaks of the mystery of life and points out that we 'do not know how the breath comes to the bones in the mother's womb'; the word רִיחַ (ruach) which the NRSV translates as breath can alternatively be translated as 'spirit', which in relation to humans is closely linked or even identified with the soul. Although the biological mechanism of conception is now reasonably well understood, the event of ensoulment remains, and in all likelihood will remain, unexplainable in human terms. Almost the only thing that can be said with certainty is that the creation of the soul is effected by divine *fiat* in the framework of providence and common grace. Even the moment of ensoulment has been the subject of some debate in the tradition, which for reasons of time will not be considered here except to note that the tradition, in keeping with the scriptural witness [Ps. 139, Is. 44:24, Jer. 1:5, Lk. 1:41-44], universally affirms the dignity of human life from the moment of conception, even when ensoulment is placed at a later time. The sixth verse returns to the theme of sowing from verse four and introduces an exhortation against idleness; again, we now have a reasonable scientific understanding of the mode of plant growth, but it remains the case that we cannot with certainty establish that seed will grow: there are simply too many unpredictable variables and they are all known by God alone, who in his sovereign providence and by means of common grace decrees the provision of advantageous circumstances for plant growth or in his unknowable wisdom and for his glory withholds such provision. Simply put, it is God alone who causes the seed to grow; there are parallels to be made with the seed of faith but there are still four verses remaining of Ecclesiastes 11 so I would encourage us all to ponder this on our own.

In some ways the seventh verse could be seen as uncharacteristic of the Preacher. 'Sweetness' and 'pleasantness' are not necessarily words that one would immediately associate with Ecclesiastes and in purely worldly terms I am not convinced that it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun. The meaning of this verse however becomes clear when contrasted with 'the days of darkness' in the following verse; this contrast is of course a very common theme in the Bible more generally and has been touched upon by the Teacher (at this point some of you may notice that I have yet to use his Hebrew name) in chapter two (my apologies to Samuel if he pontificated upon this contrast in his sermon). I would hope that most people in this congregation have at least some sense of there being a difference between light and darkness or good and evil (if not, you should probably speak to your tutor), but in these verses it seems as though the juxtaposition serves a very particular purpose: it emphasises the distinction between, on the one hand, rejoicing in all one's days and, on the other hand, remembering that 'the days of darkness', which in this context and that which follows seems to refer both to old age and to death, will be many. The end of the eighth verse briefly returns us to the comfort of the Preacher's typical language (could 'vanity' be his favourite word?). Verses nine and ten contain a similar juxtaposition between joy and judgement in youth (was this passage deliberately given to the youngest ordinand?). It is particularly interesting that Ecclesiastes seems to command the young man to follow the inclination of his heart and the desire of his eyes. This advice not only seems to be dangerous but it could be seen to directly contradict the divine command to 'not follow the lust of your own heart and your own eyes' in Numbers 15:39. The LXX adds 'blameless' to this command, but, aside from not being inspired, I am not convinced that it really helps either way: after all, our will and desire is so utterly corrupted as to make it an impossibility to follow it while also being blameless. It seems that the final words of the verse offer a qualification that is essential: 'know that for all these things God will bring you into judgement'. Follow your desires but always remember that God is watching and that he will judge us all; by extension, conform your will and your desire to the divine will in imitation of Christ the Lord submitting his human will to the divine will in the garden of Gethsemane [Mk. 14:36]. The final verse of this chapter provides advice which we will likely find difficult to follow to the letter, but it is in essence nothing more than a restatement in negative terms of the positive advice given in verse nine. The chapter ends with a return to that most familiar word of Qoheleth: vanity.