Life, the Universe and Everything
Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

You don't have to be British or a monarchist to have been moved by the photos of the Queen sitting alone at the funeral of her husband of 73years. And, as she sits opposite his coffin, it's as if she's staring death in the face, and she has to do it alone.

Well, the writer of Ecclesiastes wants you to do the same - to stare death in the face - not alone, but with him. And not just death, he wants you to stare life in the face, because what meaning can there be to life if death is the end?

Look at v1: 'The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.' It's an intriguing way to introduce himself, especially given what he says in v16: 'I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me.' So who could this be other than King Solomon, David's son, endowed with wisdom by God. And yet, despite coming so close to telling us he *is* Solomon, unlike in Proverbs and Song of Songs, he never does.

So is this Solomon? Or is it someone putting himself in Solomon's shoes, to get us to see life through Solomon's eyes? Because, whichever it is, who better than the man who had everything - money, sex, power - and wisdom - and yet blew it - to take us down all the paths we could take: the path of the hedonist or the academic; the path of power or politics; the path of the nihilist or the existentialist, each one saying, this is how to make sense of life, this is how to make a name for yourself in life.

It's why he calls himself, v1, 'the Preacher.' It's the word Qoheleth. And the *qahal* was an assembly, a gathering. The Greek translation was *ekklesia* - hence *Ecclesiastes*. So here is a man, part preacher, part pastor, part philosophy professor, getting us together to drill deep.

Wanting Your Life to Count
Look at v2, 'Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.' What a way to start a book! But he ends it the same: chapter 12:8, 'Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, all is vanity.' So this is what the book's about. It's a vanity of vanities sandwich. And *vanity of vanities* is a superlative -it's like the Song of Songs, or the Holy of holies, or Lord of Lords and King of kings. This is the greatest in its field.

But think about it - he's talking about life. Your life. That when it comes to things that are vain, that are futile, there is nothing more futile than life. Life is *the* vanity of vanities. So what is this doing in the Bible?!

Well, to answer that you need to think what the word *vanity* means? It's the word *hebel.* And he uses it some 30 times in the book. It means a mist, a breath, a puff of air.

So he's saying, that's what life is like - it's **fleeting, it's elusive, and it's pointless**. It's **fleeting**: Like that puff of smoke when you blow out a candle, it's there, but then it's gone. Like your breath on a cold winter's morning - you see it and then you don't. But it's not just fleeting, it's **elusive**. There's no substance to it. I mean, have you ever tried to hold on to smoke? Or pin down mist? Or nail down the air? That's what life is like he's saying. It's always slipping out of your grasp. And not just *some* things *about* life, but '*all* is vanity' - the sum total of life is… existential futility. Joys,

success, triumphs, relationships, there's an emptiness, a meaninglessness, a destined-to-disappoint to it all.

Now, if you're a Christian, maybe you think, 'well, thank goodness the New Testament corrects all this negativity.' Except, it doesn't. The writers repeatedly use the Greek translation of *hebel* to describe life. James says, 'What is your life? For you are *a mist* that appears for a little while and then vanishes.' (4:14). And Paul writes 'Creation [the whole world] was subjected to *futility*' (Rom 8:20) - to *hebel*. So, the 'good, good and very good' of Genesis 1 has become the vanity, vanity, every thing is vanity of Ecclesiastes 1.

In other words, life just doesn't function the way it should, the way you want it to. Nothing quite works. You don't get the job you know you should have. The project that should have gone so well, just never gets off the ground. Your hard working colleague gets fired and the liar gets promoted. The young guy with so much to give dies young and the bitter old woman just never seems to die. You get the dream job, or romantic partner, you so wanted, but it just doesn't work out how you wanted, and you feel more empty than before. As that great cultural classic, High School Musical, puts it, 'I get my hopes up, And I watch them fall every time.' Or as that famous philosopher Gru says, 'Life's like that sometimes. We're hoping for a unicorn and we get a goat.' Yes, the Preacher says, it's *hebel*.

But it's not just fleeting and elusive, it's also **pointless**. In Greek mythology, Sisyphus was condemned by the gods to pushing a giant bolder up a hill. But what happened when he got it to the top? It rolled back down again, and he had to start all over again, for all eternity. Endless labour for zero point. Yes, says, the Preacher, that's life: v3, 'What does man *gain* by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?'

Think of the world of business. A company's gain is what's left over when they've paid the salaries and settled the accounts. It's the profit at the end of the day. So think of life, the Preacher says, What do you *gain* from it all? At the end of your life, when everything is wrapped up, what will you have to show for it all?

Well, says the American Dream, or even just good-ol' fashioned consumerism, 'this is what gain looks like, this is what will satisfy you, this will leave you better off: buy this, achieve this, and you'll be someone.' And the Preacher says, 'take a long, hard look at it - what do you *really* gain? What will you have to show for the wealth, the possessions, the pleasure, the knowledge, the relationships you pursued? What will they count for?

Or even before death, how many of the goals you've reached were as fulfilling, or lasting, as you thought they might be? Last week Rhys said - no pain, no gain. But here, the preacher says, you can you can experience as much pain, you can expend as much energy, as you like, but there's still no gain.

Now, before you dismiss that as a bit of existential angst from a guy who needs to get out more, listen to Jesus: 'What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?' (Matt 16:26). You can gain *everything* the world can offer, Jesus says, and you will have gained *nothing* - if you lose your soul.

Because the Preacher is talking, v3, about life 'under the sun.' About life in a world where this world is all there is. Where there's nothing above the sun. With John Lennon, he wants you to *imagine* - 'imagine there's no heaven.' A world of secular, scientific materialism - no God and no eternity.

Except his conclusion is far more sobering and real than Lennon's. Because the more you erase God from life, the more meaningless, the more pointless, the more *hebel* it becomes. You see, if you pursue secularism through to its logical conclusion, if life under the sun really is all there is, then what gain is there from your life? What will your life have achieved?

Well, you might say, my friends, my family, the good I'll have done, the difference I'll have made - they're my lasting contribution. 'Lasting?', says the preacher, like smoke is lasting. Like mist is lasting, because they too will die and disappear. If there is no eternity, there is no lasting gain from anything.

Because nothing lasts. Because you live in a universe without meaning.

An Indifferent Cosmos

Gerard Bradley, professor of law at Notre Dame recently wrote about the famous 1992 Supreme Court ruling that said, 'at the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe.' To be really free, you've got to be the meaning maker, you get to decide what the meaning - not just of your life, but of all of life - is. And to that Bradley wrote, "This lonely soul… stands before the cosmos, seeking meaning in it - or, more accurately, ascribing meaning to it. *But the cosmos can be stubbornly indifferent to human vanity*."

And it's to the stubbornly indifferent cosmos that the preacher turns. Verse 4, 'A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.'

One day, you will die, he says. Baby Boomers, Generation, X, Y, Z, whatever, you'll all go, and the next generation will come, and the world will carry on as though nothing has happened. The sun will still rise, the wind will still blow, the rivers will still flow and you will be gone. You know, our culture tells us, you're something! And the universe, coldly indifferent to our presence, answers, no you're nothing.

You know, if you're of more noble mind than just to live selfishly, you want to leave the world a better place for the generations to come, don't you? And the preacher says, who are you kidding? Generations come and go, and if there is no God, no judge of good or bad, better or worse, then making the world a better place is *hebel*, there's no such thing as 'better'.

Instead, in v5-7, he describes the endless cycle of nature, the cosmic merry-go round on which we are just a speck. Like Sysyphus pushing his rock up the hill, the sun rises and sets, only to rise again. The wind blows, but where does it blow? Round and round in circles. The rivers flow into the sea and the sea is never full. If there is no God, it's not just life, but nature itself that has no point. It's on a treadmill to nowhere. It's like a runner running laps - it goes nowhere.

Charles Taylor, the Canadian philosopher, talks of how, before the 'enlightenment', we saw creation as *enchanted* - we believed in God and angels and demons and supernatural, spiritual powers. But

now, creation has been *dis*enchanted. Now, we look at he cosmos as clockwork - run by the rules of nature. Except, those rules are just the product of chance. There is no Rule Maker.

But, again, such a view has its logical consequences, doesn't it? In his book, *Civilisation*, Tom Holland quotes the physicist Steven Weinberg: 'The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems *pointless*.'

Now, I don't know how that leaves you feeling, but the Preacher tells us what it does to him: v8: 'All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.' Face the facts of life under the sun, and it can become emotionally exhausting. In the words of the great social commentator, Mick Jagger, 'I can't get no satisfaction' - when you realise that nothing in this world can ultimately satisfy you, that nothing can quench your thirst for meaning, then there becomes a weariness to life.

'O come on', you might say, 'things aren't that bad! And as for everything going round in circles, think of the progress humanity has made!' Verse 9, 'What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun.' Yes, there are new inventions, but people, politics, and power they never change. And as for technological advances, they too never really satisfy. The new iGadget comes out and the world's agog… for a moment, until the next one, and the next one. But why does there need to be a next one? Because the last one doesn't last, it doesn't satisfy.

But in a closed system, under-the-sun-world, you're never going to find satisfaction - that inner filling of your search for meaning. For that to happen something has got to break in from the outside, from a world above the sun. For that to happen the world would have to be enchanted. But scientific materialism tells you, you can't have such a world. To quote the physicist, Richard Lewontin, 'our materialism must be absolute… for we cannot allow a divine foot in the door.'

But such a view of the cosmos has terrible implications doesn't it? Verse 11, 'There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after.' You see, no remembrance means no final judgment, it means that alongside no ultimate meaning there will be no ultimate justice, no calling to account.

And just imagine what could happen if you had a world view that combined the idea that life has no meaning and man is just an expendable speck in an indifferent cosmos with the idea that there is no ultimate justice. No Day of Judgment. Imagine what the powerful could do to the vulnerable. Except you don't have to imagine, do you?

Heinrich Himmler, architect of the Nazi Holocaust said, 'There is nothing particular about man. He is but a part of this world.' No meaning, no final judgement, and all that matters is power now. And where does it end? In the murder of millions in the death camps, in the smoke, the *hebel* of the crematoria.

And yet, it's not just the horrors of history, is it? Think of the great or beautiful moments of life. Think of watching a sunrise or sunset, or publishing your first paper, or holding your child. Think of that act of kindness someone did to you. Or of your grandparents who loved you. In a universe that has no meaning, love has no meaning. Joy has no meaning. They're just chemical reactions in your

brain. And in a universe where all will be forgotten, none of these relationships or achievements matter.

But no one lives like that, do they? You couldn't. If you really think that's true then you live your life denying your beliefs, because you live like there is meaning, that life does matter, that love is real. In other words, you're not facing the facts, the Preacher says.

So what makes most sense of life? That the nihilists and existentialists and atheists are right, and to get through life you just have to bury your head in the sand and pretend, or that something else make far more sense?

Well, the Preacher is going to take us down path after path to help us answer that. But if we leave it to the end of the book, we'll have gone mad by the time we get there.

Look Above the Sun

Now, there is a certain irony when someone says, there is no absolute truth, it's all socially constructed. Because, in the process, they're making an absolute truth claim. And when the Preacher says everything is meaningless, ironically, he is saying something of profound meaning. And that alone should warn you that an under-the-sun approach to life is never going to satisfy intellectually. Because you can't even begin to tackle Truth and Meaning without making use of Truth and Meaning. And besides, you know, deep down, that life has meaning, that love is real, that the world is enchanted. That life only makes sense if you *do* let a divine foot in the door.

You see, when you allow the world above the sun to break in, then instead of the cosmos being coldly indifferent, it becomes a shadow of the Creator's power and glory. It becomes a symbol, not of futility, but a signpost pointing you higher. And in the words of the Psalms, the sun becomes a bridegroom leaving his bedroom, telling us that from its rising to its setting God is to be praised. And rivers begin to dance and trees clap their hands and the birds don't just warble, they worship.

As Paul says, in Romans 8, creation has been subjected to futility, but subjected *in hope*. In hope of redemption breaking in.

You see, if Ecclesiastes is the words of the son of David, king in Jerusalem, they leave you longing for the greater Son of David, the true king of Israel, for Jesus, who comes from the world above the sun and enters our world. And at the cross, he takes the curse of our sin, the curse of the Fall, the curse of good work in God's garden now become toil and *hebel,* upon himself.

And in him, God says, 'Behold, I am doing a new thing' (Is 43:19). And Jesus ushers in the *new* covenant in his blood, and he gives us *new* hearts, and makes us *new* creations, giving us new purpose in life. And in Revelation he promises, "Behold, I am making all things new." (Rev 21:5). He is the One New Thing under the sun.

Live in a world in which Christ has broken in, and suddenly life is full of meaning.

Firstly, your work, your toil, is full of meaning. Having spent a whole chapter working out the implications of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, Paul ends 1 Corinthians 15, by saying, 'Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your

labour is not in vain' (1 Cor 15:58). Begin to see your work as unto the Lord, and for his glory, from washing the dishes to finalising a deal, your work becomes full of purpose.

Secondly, your life can count. Because as you invest in people you and they will gain, because it's people who *will* last for eternity.

But thirdly, live in a world in which Christ has broken in, and it'll help keep you from seeking satisfaction in all the wrong places, and that will dial down your frustration at the *hebel* of life. Because you know that work, and leisure, and relationships, and possessions - however good - can never deliver the perfect life. Only the world above can do that. They can never ultimately satisfy you - only God can. And that means all these other things will find their right place… and you'll be much less stressed!

And fourthly, when God's your treasure, when he's what satisfies you, it removes your fear of death, because you know death is not the end. Instead, with Paul, you can say,'to live is Christ, but to die is gain.' (Phil 1:21)

Listen to Paul again: 'We do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.' (2 Cor 4:16-18.)

Fix your eyes above the sun and life below the sun will still be full of *hebel*, but you know something far better is coming.