

Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.
(Ecclesiastes 1:2)

The choice of the word “vanity” by the translators in today’s Old Testament reading is unfortunate; such are the challenges of translation work. The confusion goes all the way back to the late fourth century, when St. Jerome translated the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into Latin, in what came to be called The Vulgate. Jerome chose the Latin word, *vanitas*, for the Hebrew word, *hebel*. But the writer of Ecclesiastes isn’t talking about vanity in the same way that we use the word to talk about someone staring at himself in a mirror or that Carly Simon intended when she sang “you’re so vain you probably think this song is about you.” Literally, *hebel* means vapor or mist or breath. (Think of a kid with the croup and running a vaporizer in her bedroom—that mist coming out is *hebel*.) The thing about vapor is that you can see it, but you can’t grasp it because it’s not graspable. It’s more air than water. So we might more accurately try to hear that first verse of today’s reading like this: *Vapor of vapors, says the Teacher, vapor of vapors. All is vapor.*

The writer insists that life is like that sometimes, maybe even *most* of the time. We try to convince ourselves that the world we inhabit fits into a predictable, Newtonian model where there is a cause for every effect. We sometimes assume that if we can influence the right causes then we will get the effects we desire. If you do “a” and “b,” then “c” will surely follow.

Except the world isn’t always like that. Sometimes you do everything you are supposed to do and yet the result comes out of the blue. We teach our children to study hard so that they can get into a good college and find meaningful work. And that’s all good; but the problem is that the economy itself is beyond our control and sometimes the bottom falls out, sometimes the jobs are no longer available or they all move to India.

If you do “a” and “b,” then “c” is supposed to follow. So you eat more fiber and reduce saturated fats and you get cardio-vascular exercise for at least thirty minutes three times a week; in short you do everything your doctor says. It’s supposed to follow, then, that you will live to be ninety or a hundred, right? Except there you are, sitting in the doc’s office and before she opens her mouth to tell you the results of the tests you know what she is going to say. “How long do I have?” you ask with a trembling voice.

Life is not always fair. That isn’t an excuse to avoid hard work in school or to stop taking care of our bodies. It just means that there are no guarantees. Sometimes the world is insanely unpredictable, because it’s beyond our control; because so much of our lives is like *hebel*—like vapor, like mist. *Vanity of vanities, all is vanity, says the Teacher.*

Usually in English translations the writer is called “the Teacher” or in some translations, “the Preacher.” But here, too, it helps to go back to the Hebrew, which is *Koheleth*: literally, “the gatherer.” The irony here is clearly intentional. The Gatherer was taught that wisdom was like a commodity—something you could gather and control and use and manipulate. He once believed that. But what he has discovered in his life is that Wisdom, too, is more like vapor; it is simply not gather-able.

Koheleth seems to have been raised by parents and teachers who put a lot of stock in the Book of Proverbs, which is pretty good stuff about learning how to navigate your way in the world. It's common sense, really. Mind your "p's" and "q's." Look both ways before you cross the street. Honor your mother and father. Remember the meaning of the story Pinocchio, and choose your friends wisely. Because one bad apple can spoil the whole bunch.

Those of us called to the vocation of parenting or teaching need to remember that children need rules and boundaries, and part of our work is to teach them that choices do have consequences. It is certainly true that if you study hard you are way more likely to succeed than if you don't. And it is true that one should choose one's friends wisely, because they influence the situations we find ourselves in and the choices we make. It's true that people who care for their bodies do live longer as a rule. It's true that what goes around comes around. So choose to follow the straight path and life will go well; break the rules and eventually you'll get caught. That's Proverbs, in a nutshell, and we shouldn't minimize the importance of such conventional wisdom. Without it we lapse into nihilism.

But none of these proverbial truths represent quite the *whole* truth, and that is a danger—because when bad stuff happens we often spend all of our time trying to find the cause and maybe even blaming the victim. That's where Koheleth comes in. Proverbial wisdom is *mostly* true. But sometimes life is more like vapor; there are factors way beyond our control. Proverbial truth can't lead to certainty because life doesn't lend itself to certainty. Sometimes you choose the best friends and life still unravels. Sometimes you end up in the wrong crowd and that's where you learn the most important of life lessons.

I like to picture Koheleth as a crotchety guy in his early sixties. If I were making Ecclesiastes into a film I'd convince someone like Jack Nicholson or maybe Clint Eastwood to play the lead and the film would open with him sitting at a bar and sipping on a scotch as he delivers those first lines we heard today: *Vanity of vanities, all is vanity...* He isn't saying that you shouldn't teach your kids the wisdom of Proverbs. He's just saying that if that's *all* you choose to know about the world, then you are deluding yourself. He's just reminding people that you can read all the right books and make all the right choices, but it will not guarantee the outcome you are looking for because life doesn't come with guarantees.

Jesus, I think, is indebted to Koheleth more than we have sometimes been taught and we get a glimpse of that in today's Gospel. The parable Jesus first told is surrounded by teachings about how we should deal with money, but the story itself would make Koheleth proud: a parable about a responsible guy who is doing what you are supposed to do: planning for retirement by faithfully contributing to his 401-K plan. But Jesus says the guy is a fool because now at last he is ready to relax and eat and drink and be merry and guess what? He suffers a heart attack three days after his big retirement party. Ouch.

Koheleth says that we will all face good days and bad days and we can't control which will happen when. So he offers two words of advice that summarize well the entire book: consider and enjoy. If life is a mess, then stop and consider. Ask the question, what can I learn here? And when life is good, then be sure you aren't too busy to miss it. Enjoy.

Because life is not controllable or graspable—because it is more like vapor—all you can do is consider and enjoy. As that most familiar of Koheleth texts puts it, there is a time and a season for everything: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to pluck up what has been planted. One needs to learn how to tell time like that and go with the flow. We need to learn how to take things in stride. If we spend all winter waiting for summer, and all summer waiting for fall, we will miss out on the passage of time. So consider, and enjoy.

When I teach Ecclesiastes to undergraduates over at Assumption College, I always ask them if they hear this message as good news or as cynical and depressing. The answer, of course, reveals far more about them than it does about Koheleth, which of course is the whole point. It's too easy to read Koheleth as a kind of existentialist who despises life, or when he says "eat, drink, and be merry" to see him as an epicurean. For my own part, I find Koheleth to be a truthful realist, and if he is in fact right that this is how the world, then there is "good news" to be discovered in facing that reality. If the world really is beyond our control, then someone needs to slap us upside the head sooner rather than later because we can be spared a lot of heartache when we learn to let go of our need to try to control the flow of life. On the good days, enjoy. On the tough days, consider.

This is very difficult advice for many of us. As we celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Baptism this weekend, I wonder what advice Koheleth might offer to parents. I wonder, if he were to write a parenting manual, what he might say. Perhaps something like this: every generation has its Dr. Spock or Dr. Brazelton and they all seem very self-assured that if you do what they tell you to do, all will go well. Take the experts with a grain of salt. Just remember this: kids grow up very fast in an unsteady and confusing world. Learn to tell the time and enjoy each stage. If you can't wait until they can walk, you will miss the amazing mystery of crawling. If the day they start walking they drive you crazy because you find yourself wishing they were infants again, you are setting yourself up to be a pretty unhappy parent. If you wish they'd get their driver's license so you don't have to operate a cab service, don't worry: soon enough they will get their driver's license and you will really have something to worry about. Each day, each week each year, consider and enjoy because this day will not come your way again.

For me there is tremendous freedom in recognizing the vanity of thinking we are in control, for from that place good news can be discovered. One of the discoveries that can come from that place is something perhaps like the Serenity Prayer attributed to Reinhold Niehbur, who perhaps in some small measure was indebted to Koheleth—and certainly to Jesus—for this prayer:

God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.

Living one day at a time;
Enjoying one moment at a time;
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;
Taking, as Christ did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it;
Trusting that God will make all things right if I surrender to His Will;
That I may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely happy with Him forever in the next. Amen.