

18<sup>th</sup> Sunday of year C (2016)

Forty Martyrs'; St Bede's

“Vanity of vanities,” the preacher says, “All is vanity”. The Book of Ecclesiastes, which links to the word for Church - '*ecclesia*', meaning a gathering is often today called the Book of *Qoheleth*, a name which is often translated as 'the preacher' but is a word which means also teacher, and gatherer of people, or collector of sayings, and could be a title, or a nick-name or a personal name. It is part of the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament. The author seems to claim to be Solomon, the proverbially wise king, but it dates from the second century BCE, long after the reign of David's regal son. It is a curious little work, which moves from unhappy misery to cynical gloom, without every allowing the sun to shine through in any hopeful way. Indeed, “there is nothing new under the sun”, he laments. “All is vanity” is his pessimistic refrain.

Vanity, though, is not a very good translation of the word he uses, despite its familiarity. The Hebrew word evokes something frail and transient, ephemeral, wispy, there and suddenly gone. It is the name of the second son born to Adam and Eve, whom we know as Able. *Hevel* is the lad's name in Hebrew and that is a word that means a puff of breath. All the Hebrew words for self or soul are linked to the act of breathing. When God formed the first man, *adam*, from the clay of the earth, *adama*, God breathed life into the moulded clay and a living being was created (Gen. 2,7). “*Hevel* means a shallow, fleeting, ephemeral breath”\*. Like many biblical names the name defines the character.

In contrast, *Cain*, who will kill his brother has a name which means to acquire, to possess, to own. *Hevel* is a light, breathy word; whereas Cain is hard, edgy, Cain's descendants will forge iron. *Hevel*, of course, has no descendants; he is a will o' the wisp, briefly here and suddenly gone. No reason is given in the story as to why *Hevel's* sacrifice was pleasing to God and that of Cain was not. Though Cain's subsequent actions reflect his values and his character. The murder of his brother seems to be premeditated, not an impetuous crime of passion. He goes out into the fields, presumably to be away from witnesses and he looks around before striking the fatal blow. When ask by God the whereabouts of his brother he is as evasive as were his guilty parents when questioned by God. “Am I my brother's keeper?” The whole of the Bible is an answer to that cynical question.

Cain is the forefather of metalworkers and a people called the Kenanites. We meet them later in the biblical story when Moses flees from Egypt after he has murdered an Egyptian, albeit in defending a fellow Israelite. He journeys to Midian and, in the manner of the bible he gains a wife at a well. He defends the girls who are watering their father's sheep against unruly shepherds. Their father is Jethro, a priest of that area and a Kenanite. It appears that the God Jethro worships is named Yahweh. The

One God seems to be closely linked to murderers. “Just what we have always told you,” scream a section of commentators, “Religion breeds violence. It is the cause of all our troubles!”

God is associated with violence, not as perpetrator but as a God who is involved in the world as healer as well as judge. Cain is punished for his crime, condemned to wander the earth, but he is not condemned to death. Rather God protects him. An early lesson about God is that he is not a hanging judge. Cain's parents were expelled from the Garden but God clothed them, ready for their new environment. Cain he also protected. Nevertheless he heard the cry of *Hevel's* blood and did not ignore that cry; God heard the cry of his people oppressed in Egypt and called on to Moses to be his instrument in liberating them. God will judge but he will judge in mercy and compassion. The story of the hard-edged Cain and the fleeting *Hevel* is the first indication that God chooses but in choosing he does not reject. *Hevel* is favoured but Cain is not cut off.

Back to *Qoheleth*; the preacher/teacher/sage is telling us that everything is but a breath; fragile, impermanent, vacuous. An eighty-six year old priest who was celebrating Mass with a tiny congregation, never completed the celebration, or completed it in Heaven; teenagers went out in the expectation of a free MacDonald's and were blown away in a hail of bullets, shot by another teenager; families out for a night of festive fun on Freedom Day, mowed down by a truck swerving through the crowds to maximize the fatalities. All their families know how fleeting is life, gone in a millisecond. In the face of horror we must not lose trust in the way of God who does not respond to violence with violence for God the all-powerful is God the all-merciful.

The advice *Qoheleth* gives is curiously worldly: “Eat, drink and be merry while you can before the inevitable happens.” This counsel links the first reading to the Gospel.

The man in the Gospel-story takes the preacher at his word. He intends to party having an abundance of wealth stored in his mega-sized barns. The alert reader must wonder who he will party with as he speaks to no one in the story except himself. And this is a culture where the men talked about everything endlessly. This man is a solitary. He is a rich elite, served by peasants whom he drains of life's necessities. They do the work he gains the rewards; and he mocks them with his bigger barns. What he should do is share his good fortune and receive their perpetual thanks and praise. He should be concerned with his honour not his bank account. You cannot take you cash with you, but you can be remembered as the finest patron who walked the earth.

God speaks and calls the man, “You fool”. Biblically, the fool is the man who has said in his heart there is no God (Psalm 13,1). As we heard Paul say in the second

reading, greed is the same as worshipping a false god. It is idolatry. This man has acted as if he were a god, mindless of the laws of God and the command to love his neighbour. While the rich, the greedy man may have had a heart attack, as likely the villagers facing starvation in sight of those mighty barns, might take the law into their own hands. Violence breeds violence.

The cycle must be stopped. The way to end the cycle is shown by God's ways of acting. God does not dismiss the crime but God does not respond in like measure. God absorbs the pain and acts in mercy. Life is fleeting, a breath; but the love of God lasts forever.

\* Jonathan Sacks, "*Not in God's Name*", Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2015. p.253. Rabbi Sacks' book eloquently demonstrates the point that God chooses but never rejects.