

WHAT MAKES SENSE WHEN LIFE DOESN'T?

5 - HOW TO BEHAVE ON THE WAY TO CHURCH.

Ecclesiastes 5:1-7.

Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil. Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few. For a dream comes with much business, and a fool's voice with many words.

When you pay a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands? For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity; but God is the one you must fear.

Introduction - going to encounter God.

I grew up going to church where the centre piece of every Sunday morning was the Lord's table. When you arrived at this church, there was a small entrance foyer. Two of the older men were there to greet you in the foyer. Then there were two heavy swinging doors that brought you into the meeting room. People used to arrive for the meeting up to half an hour before it started. They would sit in silence during that time, reflecting and meditating as they waited for the service to begin. At 11 o'clock everyone was in place. The men who had been in the foyer came in through the swinging doors and pulled a curtain across, covering the doors. It was time for the service to begin. There was a deep sense of solemnity and reverence.

It was very different from what I have experienced in other places. The building where our church met in Switzerland had its meeting on the first floor. On the ground floor there was a decent sized foyer. Since the meeting room was upstairs, it used to be a challenge to get everyone there on time. It was too easy for people to arrive and get involved in chatting around the door while we were trying to get started upstairs. In fact, there were normally more people arriving for the service during the ten minutes after we started than were actually there before the start time.

Two very different ways of preparing for worship. One, where people took their preparation very seriously: they wanted to be in exactly the right frame of mind for what was to come. The other where people seemed to arrive as they were without taking very much opportunity to think about what they had come to do.

How should you behave on the way to church?

We are looking at that this evening through the eyes of the main speaker in the book of Ecclesiastes. His name in English means something like *The Preacher*: that's what we will call him. In the middle of his survey of life "under the sun" he has some advice for people who are on their way to worship God.

Watch your step.

The Preacher starts with a warning. "Guard your steps when you go to the house of God." Watch your step. If you have travelled on the London Underground you probably know about the legendary warning to mind the gap. Watch your step as you get off the train.

It is just over six months since the wind tore off part of our roof and shattered the glass in the window above us. For several weeks we had no carpet; just the concrete floor. We had to take some health and safety measures which included having to stick some yellow striped tape over parts of the floor where someone could have tripped. Watch your step as you come to worship.

Have you ever had anyone tell you that you needed to watch out when you are preparing to encounter God? Has anyone ever warned you that approaching God could be dangerous? That is what *The Preacher* does.

Guard your steps when you go to the house of God.

This is not the only part of the Bible that encourages caution when people are coming near to God.

- When Moses was meeting God on Mount Sinai in order to receive the stone tablets with the Ten Commandments, limits were placed around the foot of the mountain so that no one would stray across and touch the mountain. Anyone who touched the mountain would be put to death.
- In the book of Leviticus, Nadab and Abihu offered to God what was described as "strange (unauthorised) fire". They died.
- In 2 Samuel 6 when the ark of the covenant was being brought into the city on a new cart. The oxen pulling the cart stumbled and the ark was about to fall when Uzzah put out his hand to steady it. We'd be inclined to think that he had done a good thing; but God killed him. The ark and its contents were not meant to be touched; the ark was meant to be carried by means of a system of rings and poles. Uzzah instinctively did something that seemed right; but people had forgotten the holiness of God.

I think there are times when *The Preacher* is almost excessively pessimistic; he almost becomes bitter and cynical. Perhaps there is a tone of pessimism when he writes about going to the house of God: God is far away, he is holy and you need to be careful. But in what he says here he is simply giving expression to the kind of tone that the Old Testament sets for us through these very sobering stories.

It is very easy for us to think of God as one of our mates. It is true that Jesus is the friend of sinners - and for that we will be eternally grateful; but it is too bad if we become casual and fail to think about how holy and majestic God is; how different God is from us.

Sometimes we sing a song called "Open the Eyes of my Heart." We are singing the song to God and we say, "I want to see you." It is biblical to have the eyes of our hearts opened, but I wonder what we are thinking about when we say we want to see God. Do we want to see him the way Isaiah saw him in Isaiah 6? Isaiah had such an overpowering experience of God in the temple that he felt utterly ruined until God sent an angel to touch him with a coal of fire. How terrifying must that have been? If someone approached you with a burning piece of coal from the fireplace to touch your lips, would you not feel at least a little frightened?

But someone might want to point out that this is God in the Old Testament. We want to see Jesus. What do we mean by that? Do we want to see him the way John saw him in the first chapter of the book of Revelation? When John saw him, he fell at his feet like a dead man.

How should we behave on the way to church? Watch your step.

Learn to listen.

The second thing he says is "learn to listen."

To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil.

Listening is better than offering the sacrifice of fools.

People tend to look at these verses and conclude that there are three things going on in the Temple. There is sacrifice (as we have here); there is prayer (when people begin to speak); and there is a vow (promises made to God - talked about in verse 4).

I could well be wrong, but I wonder if the three are actually more closely connected to each other; in other words that the sacrifice being offered is offered in connection with the vow and the words which we need to keep few are words that we would speak in a vow.

If I am right, the Preacher is saying that instead of coming to the house of God getting ready to offer a sacrifice and make extravagant promises that we are incapable of keeping, and actually don't intend to keep, it would be much better to be quiet and listen.

At any rate, the sacrifice of fools likely has to do with an external gesture - the sacrifice of an animal - that does not correspond to what is going on in the heart of the worshiper. It happens. And in this instance the worshiper does not even realise that he is doing anything wrong.

To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil.

Is it not serious to think that a worshiper could be doing something that is supposed to be a good thing - God wanted people to bring sacrifices - but because of the state of his heart, the good thing becomes evil? And he does not even know the difference. False worship is not just doing the wrong thing; it can involve doing the right thing in the wrong way because the external observance does not correspond with the condition of our hearts.

Better to say nothing, to simply listen, than be involved with that kind of thing, says the Preacher.

Of course the opposite of listening is speaking and that is what the Preacher wants to warn us about. Look at verses 2 and 3:

Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few. For a dream comes with much business, and a fool's voice with many words.

The more you talk, the more likely you are to get into trouble with your words. That's a depressing thought! But a fool's voice comes with many words. It is a general principle in life:

Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent. (Proverbs 17:28)

When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent. (Proverbs 10:19)

The Preacher says that we need to bear it in mind when it comes to worship too. We can find ourselves making big claims in some of the words we sing or pray or preach. Don't be rash; don't be too quick to speak, says the Preacher. God is in heaven and you are on earth. What is he going to make of you and me, little people, coming into his presence, full of ourselves, full of our ideas, full of our promises? Listen, and let your words be few.

The point is not that we should say nothing or sing nothing, or that people like me should not endeavour to preach. But as we come here, we need to realise - including me, perhaps especially me - that what he will say to us is more important than what we will say to him (or even about him).

A few years ago Jim Packer wrote about how 100 years had changed a particular aspect of people's relationship with the church service. He reckoned that a hundred or more years ago, in certain church circles, when you went home the important question that you would be asked was how you had got on under the preaching. Nowadays, he says, people are much more likely to ask you how the preacher got on. Is he not right? What Packer's observation shows is that there has been a change in the way people listen. Instead of listening in the expectation that we will be spoken to so that we

can obey (and the idea of obedience lies behind the idea of listening in the verse) and our lives can be changed, we find it easier to pass comment on the quality of the sermon. I have to admit that I find it easier when I listen to other preachers. Many of you are the same. It is the way our culture has shaped us and in some ways it is probably inevitable.

How to behave on the way to church? Prepare to listen.

Keep your word.

The third counsel is that we keep our word. The context in verse 4 is very clearly the context of making a vow. People did that in the Old Testament, and it was a serious business. The Preacher underlines what the Law says about it.

When you pay a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands?

Just as it is better to listen than to offer the sacrifice of fools, so it is better not to make any kind of vow than to make a vow and not keep it.

There were various examples of vows in the Old Testament. There was the nazirite vow where a person set themselves apart for God under certain conditions, including not cutting his hair (that is why Samson's strength left him when he had his cut - he did not keep the vow)

You also have the example of Jephthah in the book of Judges. He made a rash vow in order to secure a military victory and it resulted in the loss of his daughter. In contrast there was the vow of Hannah to whom God gave a son, Samuel, whom she gave back to God as his servant.

These vows are voluntary, but when they are made they need to be kept. The messenger in verse 6 seems to have been some kind of religious debt collector who comes to collect what you have promised. Don't think you can fob him off by claiming that it was all just a great mistake.

If you are young, you may remember doing the thing I am about to mention; if you have children, you may be very familiar with it. It is dinner time. Someone knocks over a glass of milk or orange juice. What do they say? "I didn't mean to."

The Preacher says it is so much better to say nothing than to take a vow that you cannot keep and then claim "I didn't mean to."

Maybe it is like the way Jesus sometimes confronted people who wanted to follow him but there was something in their life that he knew would be a hindrance. He knew how to put his finger on the significant issues of a person's life.

"Do you want to follow me? Go and sell what you have, then come and follow." He was not looking for people to flock after him with all kinds of promises when all along their hearts were focussed on something more important.

Keep your word. Better in fact to keep silent than to make a promise you will not keep.

Stand in awe.

Verse 7:

For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity; but God is the one you must fear.

You can have all the great spiritual ambitions possible; you can make all the great spiritual promises possible. The Preacher sees danger. Instead of dreaming and instead of multiplying words, stand in awe of God. God is the one you must fear.

Confidence to draw near through Jesus.

We live at a different time from the Preacher. We don't go to a Temple made of stones. We don't even really go to church. We are the church. God is present in the living temple of his people - he lives among us through his Spirit. And our time is different because God has actually come to meet us. He has come to meet us in a human body. He has come to meet us in the person of Jesus Christ, his Son. While the Preacher talks about people drawing near in the house of God, God has come near to us.

Let me read you some verses from Hebrews 10:18-22

Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

God is not any less holy tonight than he was in the Old Testament. He is not any less powerful tonight than he was in the Old Testament. He is not any less majestic tonight than he was in the Old Testament. Men and women have not caught up with him since the Old Testament as though he could drop his standards.

It is that Jesus has come to bring the full revelation of his grace; and we can come into his presence.

We don't come lightly. We don't come carelessly. We still do well to watch our step; we still do well to learn to listen; we still do well to keep our word; we still do well to stand in awe. But we come with confidence: because of Jesus.