‘I Gave my heart up to despair’ – A Sermon for Trinity VII

Ecclesiastes 1.2, 12-14; 2.18-23  
Colossians 3.1-11  
Luke 12.13-21

‘So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labours under the sun.’ So says the teacher in today’s first reading, taken from Ecclesiastes, a minority voice from our Old Testament Scriptures, hardly known, a book that speaks profoundly to our world today, a world so desperately wanting to believe in faith and hope and love, but seemingly trapped in cynical patterns of consumerism and individualism.

‘Vanity of vanities.’ One of the recurring phrases of the book, the Hebrew word, hevel, means absurdity, fragility, mere breath or circling breeze. ‘The flimsy vapour that is exhaled in breathing, invisible except on a cold winter day and in any case immediately dissipating in the air.’ If we remember the second story of the creation of humanity in Genesis chapter two, we might remember God breathing into Adam and making him a living creature. In that case the Hebrew word was ru’ah, the animating life-force of Spirit, filling the lungs and being of a creature with purpose and intention. Hevel is the opposite of this, the outward breath that dissipates into the air. How strange that one of our sacred books makes such a startling assertion, that all of life ‘lived under the sun’ is simply a flimsy and dissipating thing, something absurdly pointless and worthless.

Now, I don’t want to get all political on you and suggest that Brexit might be such a ‘chasing after the wind,’ a meaningless pursuit of the impossible, or a vain desire to return to splendid isolation in which our ‘scepter’d isle’ floats past Europe
on its merry-little way, but it does seem to me that most of our political narratives
and shared language about what it means to be human, are rather flimsy and
transient. I read a jokey article in a newspaper last week in which a robot had been
created that could serve food, but that all she could do in the morning was endlessly
repeat ‘breakfast means breakfast.’ More absurdly painful than this was our new
Prime Minister's statement about the Whaley Bridge dam threatening collapse, that
it looked ‘dodgy but stable.’ Perhaps it is better at times not to speak at all.

But why does it feel at times that we are paddling without a rudder, that our
lives are adrift, that we are simply skating on the surface of things, living lives
without meaning or purpose? I think Ecclesiastes can offer us two suggestions that
might help us here. If the teacher's favourite word is *hevel*, then another favourite is
‘I’ or *ani* in Hebrew, repeated an amazing twenty-nine times over the course of this
rather short work. And if ‘vanity of vanities’ is a favourite phrase of his, then the
phrase ‘under the sun’ is not far behind. As one Rabbi puts it, ‘as long as the “I”
stands at the centre of things, the summary of one's life will always be
disappointing.’ The way we constantly live our lives, with ourselves at the centre,
turns out to be nothing at all, a mere chasing after the wind. This is the world ‘under
the sun,’ a world that is manageable, controllable, quantifiable, a world with us as
its centre, with our individual wills questioning and criticising, thinking and
doubting. Such a world is finally closed-in on itself and closed-off from us, without
ultimate meaning, a world that is both thin and cold.

But could it be that all this talk in Ecclesiastes about ‘I’ and this world hints at
a ‘higher world, a wold above the sun, a moral and spiritual world where nothing is
vanity and nothing is passing’? A world in which the “I” is not closed-in on itself, but
opened-out in imaginative faith and love to others and to God?
In our second reading today, the Apostle Paul has this to say: ‘if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.’ Here Paul talks about life and death, earth and heaven, what is revealed and hidden. This is way beyond the flimsy management speak of the contemporary Church of England and speaks of the height and depth of Christian life and imagination in a wonderful way. But what does it all mean?

What has died according to Paul is the “I” that the teacher of Ecclesiastes talks about, the “I” that makes itself the centre of all things, the “I” that orders everything around its own selfish desires, its own need for comfort and control. But a new self is born out of this death, an “I” that is orientated in a radically outward manner, orientated towards heaven and found in relationship with others and with Christ. More than this, this life is not revealed through experimental or empirical knowledge, but is shaped and known through love. In the end it is not knowledge that shapes our world, but love, a love that is glorious and resplendent, a love that is hidden until we let go of our need for self-protection and self-promotion.

Nicholas of Cusa, an amazing and confounding 15th century mystic creates this almost comedic and gnomic conversation between a Christian and a pagan in his Dialogue on the Hidden God:

Christian:    I am a Christian.

Pagan:       What are you worshipping?

Christian:   God.

Pagan:       Who is the God you worship?
Christian: I do not know.

Pagan: How can you so earnestly worship that which you do not know?

Christian: It is because I do not know that I worship.

‘It is because I do not know that I worship.’ It is almost as if this dialogue could have come straight out of Ecclesiastes, but the limits of knowledge here do not lead the Christian to cynicism or despair, but rather to wonder. We do not know everything, and we are most certainly not at the centre of the universe, as much as that pains us to admit, and things at times might well strike us as absurd, even meaningless, but if we have faith to believe that our lives are hidden within the glory of God, and that all things pulsate with his beauty and his glory, then perhaps I am not lost in the world, but am rather lost in wonder, love and praise? Amen.