

Biblical Critique of Secularism (Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8; 7: 27-29)

This meditation is about Ecclesiastes. And the question I want us to explore is *What in the world is God doing today?* We will roam throughout the whole book, and we will read one or two passages of it at the appropriate time.

What kind of a book is Ecclesiastes? What is its *style*? We find the answer in the identity of its author. In verse 12 and 13 of chapter 1 he identifies himself as a student and a king, generally believed to be Solomon. Eugene Peterson calls him a *questor*. He is someone who asks serious questions about life. He is a scholar who does empirical research, a philosopher who contemplates life and tells it like it is, and he is also a king, who gives an overview of the world as he sees it. What we have in Ecclesiastes, I propose, is a lecture, it is both a scholarly, scientific report about the state of the world and a political speech about the state of the union by a philosopher/scientist-king.

And the picture this philosopher-king paints of reality is not pretty, to say the least. The life we live, he writes, is useless and meaningless. All our efforts are a mere chasing after wind. A sense of weariness about life pervades his vision. History goes around in circles and nothing we do ever works out. What is new has been already. What is twisted cannot be straightened. The righteous get what the wicked deserve and vice versa and they are denied their rights. They have no one to plead their cause. In the end we all die and turn to dust, just like the animals. In the meantime life is governed by Murphy's law. That seems to be the message of Ecclesiastes.

Hardly a message to inspire hope. And yet there are moments in my life when I feel just like the author of Ecclesiastes writes. Even though I do not like what the questor of Ecclesiastes writes, there are times when I think he tells it like it is.

It is possible that I feel an affinity with the pessimistic picture of Ecclesiastes because I have lived too long not to. But over the years I have met quite a number of people, much, much younger than I who feel the same way. You don't have to convince these young people that there is evil in the world. They know that the righteous are losing and that the wicked are winning. What with war and famine and pollution they are fully aware that the world is in a mess. To them the picture of gloom and doom painted in Ecclesiastes is an accurate description of the state of the world and of the nation. One young man shocked me some time ago when he summed up his world and life view by saying: For me life stinks until I die—echoing the author of Ecclesiastes when he writes (2: 17, 30) I hated life ...and my heart began to despair.

So, is this the message of Ecclesiastes for us today: Life stinks and then you die? Well, not really, because tucked away in this tale of woe there is a passage that sounds entirely different. You find it in Eccl. 3: 1 – 8.

The *tone* of the description of life in this passage is so different from the rest of Ecclesiastes. It is full of hope. It is much more optimistic. It identifies time as the opportunity to live! We are creatures of time and that is good, says Solomon. There is a

time and there is time for everything. You are conceived, you're born, you grow up, you decide what to do with your life, and put your dream into practice, you start a business or a career, you marry, you raise a family, you become successful and then you rest from your labours. Time allows you to live life to the full and to enjoy it. Two pictures of life in Ecclesiastes: one of despair and one of enjoyment and happiness.

Why do so many of our young people today buy into the pessimistic part of Ecclesiastes and read past this passage in chapter 3? These are bright, highly educated young individuals. Why are they so pessimistic? I think the answer has to do with the times we live in, in the history of the Western world. Ever since the Middle Ages the history of the Western World has been one of a progressive secularization of human life. It has been characterized by an attempt to give a secular explanation of the world. It has tried to describe the meaning of life *without* the benefit of God and religion. Initially, in what is called the Modern period, this historical movement was full of enthusiasm about the human ability to figure things out by ourselves. But after the debacle of two world wars it ended up in a philosophy of despair, which we call Existentialism. Existentialists state that life is inherently utterly senseless and without meaning. And in that they echo the ultra-pessimistic world and life view that seems to pervade most of Ecclesiastes.

Today we live in the *Post-Modern, post-Existentialistic* era in the history of the Western World. Prominent thinkers today try to convince us that it is not only senseless to hold any firm convictions about the meaning of life, but it is also dangerous. Because, they say, there are many different views of the good life in the world today and to believe that your view of the world is the right one means that you are intolerant of all other views. And intolerance, it is said, inevitably leads to wars and killing and terrorism, as we are witnessing today. The main culprit in all of this, according to this secular view is religion, is a belief in God. It leads to all kinds of extremism. Which is why a recent issue of MacLean's seriously discusses the question whether God is poison!

The belief that religion and God are the cause of our current world crisis is the view of secularism. Today you find this perspective on life in the universities young people attend and in many of the textbooks they study. It is pervasive throughout the Western World. No wonder, therefore, that so many of our educated young people have such a bleak outlook on life.

But is the idea that for the sake of the peace of the world we should banish God and religion from academic and public life correct? Solomon in Ecclesiastes argues the precise opposite and that is why I have called this book of the bible a "critique of secularism". The reason why life becomes hopeless, meaningless and fraught with violence, says Solomon, is because people attempt to live it *without God*.

Ecclesiastes is full of references to God and how he connects with human life: Here are some passages: **1)** 3:14; **2)** 3:15; **3)** 3:17; **4)** 5: 1,2; **5)** 5: 4, 6; and finally **6)** 12: 13,14 Most of these references are warnings *not* to ignore God.

Secondly, references to acknowledging God in our lives also abound and they are consistently coupled with living a good life, an enjoyable life. For example:

1) 3: 13; 2) 5: 18- 20; 3) 9: 7-10.

A life with God, these passages tell us, is a life full of joy and happiness. A life without God and religion is a life of meaninglessness and despair. That is the message of Ecclesiastes in opposition to the pervasiveness of secularism in the Western world.

Is the message that religion and belief in God are essential for living the good life still relevant for the world of today? Or is it just a voice crying in the wilderness?

The view that life is best lived without God maybe prevalent in the one-third of the world, which we call the Western world, in Europe and North America. But it is a minority opinion in the two-third non-Western world. For people in Africa and South America, as Jenny and I have experienced time and again on our travels, God and religion are a normal part of their everyday living. It is normal for them interrupt their daily activities quite spontaneously with prayer and singing. In these continents also, Christianity is growing by leaps and bounds, so that two-third of all the Christians today now live in countries of the non-Western world! That is quite remarkable. Today Christianity has become a Third World religion!!

The fact that life is best lived with God in mind is also completely in accordance with our basic human nature. We were created with God in mind. Every human being has the desire to believe, to have confidence, to put their trust in something or Someone larger than themselves. In that sense human beings are incurably religious. I think that is the meaning of the phrase in chapt.3: 11, that though we are creatures of time, God has put eternity in our hearts. It is our yearning in time to be connected to God who is beyond time.

Furthermore, this religious longing to be connected to God is a longing to be *righteous*, to live an ethically good life, to be a good person, to do what is right. Every bona fide religion attempts to offer its followers a recipe for how to be and become righteous. It is for that reason that we should not just tolerate one another's faith commitment, but rather respect each other's beliefs. For by doing so we affirm them in the essence of their humanity.

There are three major religions in the world today and they are at war with one another, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. In this war the combatants show a terrible disrespect for one another's religion, one another's legitimate desire for righteousness. This war between these three religions is all the more terrible because they all accept the authority of the O.T. and each of them claims to worship the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Religiously they are all related. The war is a terrible family feud between brothers and sisters who have a lot in common. All three religions are united in their opposition to secularism. All three religions believe that our lives are blessed when we place God at the centre of our lives. Each of these religions is fueled by a strong desire to be and

become righteous. So, they appear to be just three interchangeable ways of worshipping God? Are there then no essential differences between them?

I think there is at least one essential difference between Islam and Judaism on the one hand and Christianity on the other. That difference concerns the central issue of life how human beings become righteous before God. Both Islam and Judaism teach that one can become righteous by observing certain rituals and by practicing self-sacrifice. People who practice the religious rites of Islam are considered believers. Those who don't are infidels. People who practice the religious rites of Judaism are said to belong to the chosen people of God. The others are gentiles. For both religions, righteousness can be obtained through following proper procedures. Living the good life, being a good person for them is a matter of being *self*-righteous. Islam and Judaism are do-it-yourself religions. For them righteousness is something to be earned.

The Christian way toward becoming righteous according to Eccl. 7: 27 -29 is quite different.

In this passage Solomon writes the conclusion of his search for the meaning of life. It is a summary of all he means to say. And he writes: that of all the billions and billions of people who have ever lived on the earth or will be living on earth there is only one person who can claim to be righteous. Only one! And it is a man, not a woman. It is obvious to me from verse 29 that this passage is not an expression of male chauvinism from a notorious polygamist living in a patriarchic time long ago, as if men are inherently more righteous than women. So, to whom is Solomon referring?

From the New Testament we know more fully that the person Solomon writes about is Jesus Christ. The gospel of Jesus Christ, who came from heaven to earth, who took the time to be conceived, to be born, to live, to do good and to die for the forgiveness of every imaginable unrighteous deed ever perpetrated on planet earth, that gospel makes Christianity unique among all the religions of the world. Through the righteousness of that *one* man, we are *made* righteous before God, *by* God. Righteousness is a gift to human beings not an achievement by human beings. It cannot be earned. It cannot be fabricated on earth. It comes down from heaven. In the Christian religion God comes down to earth and lives and dies in our neighbourhood. Like us, he became a human being. And by his righteous presence on earth some 2000 years ago he has made the life we live meaningful again.

So, when all is said and done, what, according to Ecclesiastes is the meaning, the purpose of life? We find this in chapter 3: 12, where Solomon writes: “*I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live,. That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God.*” On one of our trips through Kenya and Uganda Jenny and I have experienced some of this way of living. In the face of the most abject poverty and the most dreadful disease the people there have the amazing ability to laugh, to sing, to dance and to make melody unto the Lord with total abandon. And in their way of life these people of the Third World may well end up being an example to us living our Christian lives in the secularized West.

At the end of time, when all is said and done, after every thought has been thought and every word about the meaning of life has been written or spoken, God will ask you and I to give an account of what we have done with the time he has given to us to live.

And we might answer: Well, we attended church faithfully. We served as elder or deacon, we taught Sunday school, we visited the sick and the elderly, we worked in the food bank and helped out serving the homeless. We volunteered for NGO's and went on mission trips and, and... ..

And do you suppose it is possible that God might then interrupt our litany of good deeds by saying: "Yes, yes, that is great. Well done, good and faithful servant. But did you *enjoy* doing all these things? Was there happiness in it for you? Did you take pleasure in living the Christian life I gave you or was it just a burden to you, a chore?"

And what, do you suppose, would happen if people all over the world, north and south, east and west would begin to live life as a gift from God to be enjoyed? Then maybe the nations and religions of the world would cease to wage war with one another and peace/shalom(!) would break out all over the globe! That would really be something, eh? At the present time this is hardly a reality. But we may live our lives in the hope that someday we all will be one in Christ.

In the name of the Father who created us, and the Son who redeemed us, and the Holy Spirit who comforts and guides us, Amen.