

18th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – C (August 1, 2010)
Fr. Jerry Kopacek

One of the blessings of this Ordinary Time part of the Church year is that we have the opportunity to hear from a wide variety of books in the Bible over the course of our three-year cycle of Sunday readings. Today is the only Sunday in that whole cycle in which we hear from the book of Ecclesiastes, part of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. We don't know a whole lot about the origin of this book. "Qoheleth", who speaks of the vanity of all things, is not a proper name but rather describes the position of one who speaks to or teaches others who are gathered together. The most well-known passage of Ecclesiastes is in chapter three where the author speaks of how there is "a time for every affair under the heavens; a time to be born and a time to die" and so on. Those of you familiar with popular music from the 1960's may remember the song "Turn, Turn, Turn" by the Byrds (a British group)—that song was based on this passage from Ecclesiastes. It is nice to know that at least every once in a great while, rock groups could do a good song actually based on Scripture!

Ecclesiastes is a unique book among the 73 books of the Bible in that, as one author put it, it is the only book in the Bible to deal with philosophy—using human reason and wisdom alone without any recourse to divine revelation. As a result, Ecclesiastes is the only book in the Bible in which God does not speak. In the other Old Testament books, God speaks often to people like Abraham, Moses, Isaiah and the other patriarchs and prophets, or he speaks through them to his people. In the New Testament, of course, we hear from or about Jesus, the Son of God, in many ways. But in Ecclesiastes, God is silent.

And that divine silence is a key to understanding this book. Ecclesiastes is all about the question that man has struggled with during his time on earth: what is the meaning, the purpose of life? Or, in the words of another song from the '60's, "What's it all about, Alfie?" Through the twelve chapters of this book, our sacred author considers a variety of things that throughout human history have been proposed as giving ultimate meaning to our earthly life—things like knowledge, achievement, pleasure and wealth. And considering these and other such worldly possibilities, the author comes to the conclusion with which he both begins and ends this book: "Vanity of vanity—all things are vanity!" He speaks here of vanity not in the sense of being self-centered or conceited. The Hebrew word translated into 'vanity' has more the sense of vapor or a puff of wind—something that does not last, that is here for one moment and then gone the next. Our author is not saying that these earthly goals are inherently evil or harmful in themselves, but he is saying that they do not last nor can they provide any ultimate sense of contentment or lasting fulfillment. As he says later in chapter one of this book, "I have seen all things that are done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a chase after wind."

I think we all know this in our heart of hearts, even if we sometimes seem to act otherwise. We strive with great zeal and dedication for a certain goal, we follow and nurture our loyalties with great energy...but are we ever fully and completely satisfied and content? I know many of you are sports fans like me—and there is nothing wrong with that. But do we get so wrapped up in it that we think that life is not worth living unless our favorite teams win championships on a regular basis? And let me tell you: as a Vikings fan and an Iowa State fan, I have had a whole lot of experience grappling with that question...

Or on a more serious level, consider how some strive for material wealth—thinking that will bring true joy and lasting contentment. How many times have you heard of someone striking it rich in the lottery, and then their lives literally fall apart? I read about one man several years ago who won over \$16 million in the Pennsylvania lottery. He was able to relax and live on Easy Street, right? Wrong. In the years that followed, he was convicted of assault, his sixth wife left him, his brother was convicted of trying to kill him, and his landlady successfully sued him for one third of his winnings. Not exactly the happy ending, was it?? Again, money or wealth or wisdom or other earthly interests or pursuits are not necessarily evil in themselves—but they do not and cannot provide the fundamental meaning of life. That

is certainly the lesson of the parable Jesus used in today's gospel about the rich man whose most important concern was what to do with his bountiful harvest. Such things are ultimately vanity, a puff of wind, and would be of no help whatsoever when he came before the judgment seat of God.

So we return to Ecclesiastes, this unique book, the only one in the Bible that focuses entirely on that ultimate question of philosophy—what is the meaning and purpose of life. It is the only book in the Bible in which God is silent. And in a marvelously ironic way, that divine silence actually speaks volumes. Without God and without the revelation of his truth and his love, we discover along with the author of Ecclesiastes that in the end, all earthly things are indeed vanity. Even if they provide some momentary or fleeting joy or satisfaction, they do not last—they cannot last. Fortunately for us, the silence of God in Ecclesiastes does not pervade the rest of Scripture; as one author put it, the book of Ecclesiastes “is the question to which the rest of the Bible is the answer.”

There is indeed an ultimate purpose and meaning of the life we are given on this earth: it is to prepare to be with God in perfect and eternal joy in heaven. Those of you of my generation and older may remember the beginning of the Baltimore Catechism: “Who made us? God made us. Why did God make us? To know, love and serve him in this world and to be happy with him forever in heaven.” That is just as much true now as it is when we memorized those questions and answers as little kids. And we are especially blessed and privileged to know Jesus Christ, the Son of God who came to us to be the way, the truth and the life—our one and only path to eternal life. We certainly can and should find joy in the things of this world and in this life (especially our loved ones); after all, they are God's great gifts to us. But ultimate meaning and lasting contentment is not to be found in this world—they cannot be found in this world. That is the fundamentally important lesson of Ecclesiastes. In the second reading, St. Paul reminds us to seek instead “what is above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.”

Back in the Middle Ages, Thomas a Kempis wrote “The Imitation of Christ”, a classic of Christian spirituality. In that book he summarizes very well the answer to which the book of Ecclesiastes is the question. He wrote: “Wherever you are and wherever you turn, you will not find happiness until you turn to God. Why are you so distressed when events do not turn out as you wish and hope? Is there anyone who enjoys everything as he wishes? Neither you, nor I, nor anyone else on Earth. There is no one in the world without trouble or anxiety, be he king or pope. . . . But raise your eyes to the riches of Heaven, and you will see that all the riches of this world are as nothing.” That is indeed what it is really all about.