

Evenings: Ecclesiastes

Brian Elfick

Brian is the rector of St Philemon's in Toxteth. Before that, he did various jobs telling people about Jesus: at Stowe School in Buckinghamshire working with school kids, in New York working with young adults, and in Cambridge working with students. He has been married to Alice, a barrister, since 2010, and they have two children: Lucy and Edward.

Talk 1: Ecclesiastes 1:1-11

A book for believers?

See 1:13; 2:24; 3:17; 5:2; 7:26; 12:11

(1) Observation

(2) Explanation

See Genesis 3

(3) Application

Things to chat about

How does this idea of a 'fleeting, frustrating life' make sense of your own experience?

What do you make of this command to 'give up on gain'?

Talk 1 – passage to reflect on

“...cursed is the ground because of you;
in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.

By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread,
till you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
for you are dust,
and to dust you shall return.”

Genesis 3:17-19

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Romans 8: 18-25

Talk 2: Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:26 - 'The king who couldn't fix life'

Things to chat about

Are you persuaded that if this king couldn't fix life, we can't?

How does Jesus encourage you to wait for God to fix life instead?

What is the Preacher calling us to do in the meantime? What questions does this leave you with?

Talk 2 – passage to reflect on

Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass, which is alive in the field today, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith! And do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be worried. For all the nations of the world seek after these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things will be added to you.

Luke 12:27-31

Talk 3: Ecclesiastes 3

Things to chat about

How can you identify with this idea that God has put eternity and judgment day into our hearts?

Can you think of specific ways that 'receiving and revering' might affect your attitude to this coming week?

Talk 3 – passage to reflect on

It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgement before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.

1 Corinthians 4:4-5

“No one looking at world history without some preconception in favour of progress could find in it a steady up gradient. There is often progress within a given field over a limited period. A school of pottery or painting, a moral effort in a particular direction, a practical art like sanitation or shipbuilding, may continuously improve over a number of years. If this process could spread to all departments of life and continue indefinitely, there would be “Progress” of the sort our fathers believed in. But it never seems to do so. Either it is interrupted (by barbarian irruption or the even less resistible infiltration of modern industrialism) or else, more mysteriously, it decays.

The idea which here shuts out the Second Coming from our minds, the idea of the world slowly ripening to perfection, is a myth, not a generalization from experience.

And it is a myth which distracts us from our real duties and our real interest. It is our attempt to guess the plot of a drama in which we are the characters. But how can the characters in a play guess the plot? We are not the playwright, we are not the producer, we are not even the audience. We are on the stage. To play well the scenes in which we are “on” concerns us much more than to guess about the scenes that follow it.

In King Lear (III:vii) there is a man who is such a minor character that Shakespeare has not given him even a name: he is merely “First Servant.” All the characters around him—Regan, Cornwall, and Edmund—have fine long-term plans. They think they know how the story is going to end, and they are quite wrong. The servant has no such delusions. He has no notion how the play is going to go. But he understands the present scene. He sees an abomination (the blinding of old Gloucester) taking place. He will not stand it. His sword is out and pointed at his master’s breast in a moment: then Regan stabs him dead from behind. That is his whole part: eight lines all told. But if it were real life and not a play, that is the part it would be best to have acted.

The doctrine of the Second Coming teaches us that we do not and cannot know when the world drama will end. The curtain may be rung down at any moment: say, before you have finished reading this paragraph. This seems to some people intolerably frustrating. So many things would be interrupted. Perhaps you were going to get married next month, perhaps you were going to get a raise next week: you may be on the verge of a great scientific discovery; you may be maturing great social and political reforms. Surely no good and wise God would be so very unreasonable as to cut all this short? Not now, of all moments!

But we think thus because we keep on assuming that we know the play. We do not know the play. We do not even know whether we are in Act I or Act V. We do not know who are the major and who the minor characters. The Author knows. The audience, if there is an audience (if angels and archangels and all the company of heaven fill the pit and the stalls) may have an inkling. But we, never seeing the play from outside, never meeting any characters except the tiny minority who are “on” in the same scenes as ourselves, wholly ignorant of the future and very imperfectly informed about the past, cannot tell at what moment the end ought to come. That it will come when it ought, we may be sure; but we waste our time in guessing when that will be. That it has a meaning we may be sure, but we cannot see it. When it is over, we may be told. We are led to expect that the Author will have something to say to each of us on the part that each of us has played. The playing it well is what matters infinitely.”

CS Lewis, ‘The World’s Last Night’

Talk 4: Ecclesiastes 4-6

(1) A world of fools (4:4; 6:7)

The bottom of the pile (4:1-3)

Little Miss Drop-Out (4:4-6)

Mr Workaholic (4:7-8)

King Rat (4:13-16)

Fat Cat (5:8-12)

Mr 'Oh Dear!' (5:13-20)

Sir Joyless (6:1-6)

'Who knows what is good for a person in life?' (6:7-12)

(2) The way to be wise (5:1-7)

v1a

v1b-3

v4-6

The effect it has: (4:9-12; 5:18-20)

Things to chat about

In what ways can you see yourself motivated by greed and envy?

How has this passage challenged or encouraged you?

Are there any ways you would like to make progress in coming to Jesus, listening and changing?

Talk 4 – passages to reflect on

Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” The Jews then said, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?” But he was speaking about the temple of his body.

John 2:19-21

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

James 1:22-25

Talk 5: Ecclesiastes 7-8

Things to chat about

How are you tempted to undervalue wisdom?

How are you tempted to overvalue wisdom?

How are you tempted to misuse wisdom?

Talk 5 – passages to reflect on

Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” The Jews then said, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?” But he was speaking about the temple of his body.

John 2:19-21

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

James 1:22-25

Talk 6: Ecclesiastes 9-12

Things to chat about

In what areas are you inclined to think that tomorrow will be better than today?

How might focusing on the goodness of today help you to serve God?

Talk 6 – passages to reflect on

Blessed be the Lord, who daily bears us up...

Psalm 68:19

Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts

Psalm 95:7-8

And he said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."

Luke 9:23

"Give us each day our daily bread"

Luke 11:3

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.

2 Corinthians 4:16

Behold, now is the favourable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

2 Corinthians 6:2

But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today", that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

Hebrews 3:13