



Editorial: What's It All About, Anyway?

When it comes to the book of Ecclesiastes and its author “The Teacher,” I must confess more than a little ambivalence. I admit that as a young seminarian many years ago, I had an attraction to this book because of what I saw (at the time) as its cynical edginess. In his nonchalance and flippancy the Teacher seemed “cool,” not really taking a stand on much of anything, and I really liked that. It was the 1980s, after all! Now as I have come to the age of Medicare, I realize how ridiculous such a characterization was, and how ridiculous I was. Now my ambivalence is fueled by an honest inability to really nail down what the Teacher is actually trying to say. Is wisdom good, or not worth the effort? The Teacher seems to be saying “yes” to both at the same time, which is more than a little frustrating. I have the same reaction to Ecclesiastes that I have to Zen Buddhism and process theology—they all make my head hurt.

The Germans have a word for the attitude of the Teacher—*Weltschmerz*—which literally means “world pain” or “world weariness” (Don’t things always sound more profound in German?). And I have to say that having reached age sixty-five, I can understand his position on things much better than I did forty years ago. But what attracts me to the Teacher now is that although he does evidence a profound world-weariness, that is not the totality of his position. I get the feeling that, despite everything, he is still hopeful and engaged with the world. It’s just that the naïve optimism of his youth, or perhaps his immature cynicism, have been worn away in the rough-and-tumble of life itself.

The Teacher spent his life gaining wisdom—all the wisdom he could amass from the religious and philosophical traditions around him. But here in the book he comes to pronounce that this attempt to gain wisdom is an ethereal “nothingness” or “vanity.” So, what does he mean by such a pronouncement? To be honest, I am not quite sure. Is the wisdom itself folly, or rather just the pursuit of wisdom? If he had to do it all over again, would he do the same things? Could he have ever

recognized the “vanity” of the world without the gaining of knowledge? Could he have been happier if he had never tried? So many questions and so few answers. But I do think he is not rejecting wisdom and its pursuit, but perhaps rather depending too much on either the subject or the process.

An ongoing refrain in the book is that amid all the elements of the world and the search for wisdom, one ought to find enjoyment in eating and drinking, and in one’s toil. Now, this could easily come across as an unthinking hedonism—just forget about the world and “gratify the flesh.” But I don’t think so. I sense that the Teacher’s searching after truth led him back to the mundane (but profound) truths of the world, and of taking pleasure in the ordinary things. He might not have ever come to such a realization without the quest for wisdom in the first place—like searching the ends of the world for meaning, only to find it in one’s own backyard.

I had the honor of working with Dr. Martin Marty as one of his doctoral students, and it was a wonderful experience. But beyond the many other things I learned from him was something he admitted about himself. He said that despite appearances, he was certainly not an optimist, but that he did have hope. Not optimism, but hope. When you look around at the world, there seems to be precious little reason for optimism, to be sure, but as a Christian, one must hope, certainly and totally—hope that the promises of God can be trusted absolutely. I suspect there is much the same attitude in the book of Ecclesiastes and from the Teacher.

Those who believe and trust in God can trust that although the wisdom of the world can fail, and eventually will be seen as “folly” or “vanity” (nothingness), one can still rely on God’s continuing and dependable goodness. The Teacher does not seem to reject the world in a nihilistic fashion, but embraces the goodness with which God has endowed it. Certainly there are all sorts of troubles and vexations in life, but God is there anyway.

I can say it no better than the Teacher himself. After saying that God has given both work and enjoyment to the world to sustain us, he concludes:

I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him. That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what has gone by. (Eccl 3:14-15)

If this is what the Teacher learned from all his study and searching for wisdom, then the time was well spent.

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