

“Vanity of vanities! All things are vanity!” (1:2) The Book of Ecclesiastes is full of doubt and skepticism. There is nothing that will last forever. Possessions may be destroyed in a fire or flood. Fame is fleeting. The heroes of today are worthy of statues but they will be the scapegoats of future generations who will tear them down. Success is only temporary. The stock market rises one day and falls to a new low the next. A scientific breakthrough about the pandemic seems like it is just over the horizon one day and the next it seems like it is a year out in the future. As Ben Franklin said, there are only two certainties in life: death and taxes. Vanity of vanities! Life is full of emptiness, futility, and absurdity.

Some date the writing of the Book of Ecclesiastes in the 3rd century before Christ when foreign kings oppressed Judea. The average person felt powerless to change anything for the better. For Qoheleth, the author, “God seems remote and uncommunicative, and we cannot hope to understand, much less influence, God’s activity in the world” (Intro). Amidst all of this pessimism, there are glimpses here and there of light amidst the darkness. We should always look for the hidden gifts from God and rejoice in them.

- Gathering for a meal we give thanks to God. With our family or dining companions, we eat and drink and have time for fellowship. Amidst the uncertainty of the pandemic, perhaps the social gatherings are smaller in number but the limits on our movements may give us more time to earnestly speak with our family.
- “I recognized that whatever God does will endure forever; there is no adding to it, or taking from it. Thus has God done that he may be revered” (3:14).
- Life may indeed be fleeting and short, but eternity is forever. God gives each of us an immortal soul, and his deepest desire is for us to live holy lives that we may join Him for life eternal.
- We may describe work as toil, but the soul is fed by working for the good of others and helping our neighbors in times of need. The Apostle Paul echoes this in his farewell address to the priests of Miletus. “In every way I have shown you that by hard work of that sort we must help the weak, and keep in mind the words of the Lord Jesus who himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’” (Acts 20:35).
- “Those to whom God gives riches and property, and grants power to partake of them, so that they receive their lot and find joy in the fruits of their toil: This is a gift from God” (5:18). Every gift from God calls for good stewardship on our part. If we have been blessed in riches, we will be doubly blessed in sharing them with those in need.
- “There are those who are just but are treated as though they had done evil, and those who are wicked but are treated as though they had done justly. This, too, I say is vanity” (8:14). God calls us to unite our own suffering with the suffering of Jesus on the cross that good may come forth from our sacrifice. To work in union with our savior is virtuous.
- “Go, eat your bread with joy and drink your wine with a merry heart, because it is now that God favors your works. At all times let your garments be white, and spare not the perfume for your head. Enjoy life with the wife you love” (9:7-9). Reading Ecclesiastes from a sacramental perspective, we may rejoice in Holy Communion where we receive the Bread of Life and drink from the Cup of the Precious Blood. We rejoice at being bathed in the cleansing waters of Baptism where we receive the white garment and our heads are anointed with Chrism. We rejoice with a bride and groom as they unite their love with Jesus on the cross.

Like the author of the Book of Ecclesiastes, we may find much to be cynical about in our troubled world. But that is no reason to quit trying. I am always reminded of the example of Mother Teresa:

The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow; Do good anyway.
Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough; Give the world the best you've got anyway. You see, in the final analysis, it is between you and God; It was never between you and them anyway.