WALMSLEY BIBLE STUDY – ECCLESIASTES SESSION 1

1. PESSIMISM; Problems & Remedy: Chs 1 to 3 cf: Ps 8; Ps 19; Ps 39; Mat 23; Mat 6 19-34; Ro 8 22-27; 2 Cor 3 10

Chapter 1 vs 1 – 11 'Vanity, Vanity, all is Vanity', saith the Preacher (Heb Qoheleth; Gk Ekklesiastes – both related to the meaning of 'gathering': Lat Ecclesium = meeting place, 'Church', place where people hear a preacher)

Q 1: The book seems to open with a cry of rebuke, despair, and warning. What are the main themes of this passage, and what 'voices' and attitudes do you hear and see today that would invoke suck rebuke?

Discontentment with Politics; hardships; changes generally, etc. War in various parts of the World. People starting projects and not finishing them. Man has real influence over the World, and yet humankind is a fleeting moment, a grain of sand, in the history and continuum of the Earth and the universe. This ought to make us very humble, but it can also make us disdainful of warnings to the extend of pleasing ourselves – hedonism – for what does it matter? We might be dead tomorrow!

Chapter 1 vs 12-18 Wisdom is meaningless.

Q 2: What do you think the Preacher is trying to say in his conclusions after studying wisdom all his like? Do you agree with the statements he is making? In what context and with what perspective do you think he is speaking? What 'Wisdom' today do you consider to be folly?

Humility & Perspective. 'Be careful what you wish for'. The unending quest for knowledge, development, growth, improvement, technology – we are never satisfied. Why? What is the real purpose of life for us? What is the purpose of existence for anything without a sense of ultimate purpose and direction? There is a demand for humility and admission of guilt for our follies. 'Capitalism' is the sum of our insatiable human desires, and it is utterly unsustainable and de-humanising in the end. IT and technology draw us away from nature and basic living requirements. Ultimately it will be our downfall.

Chapter 2 vs 1-11 Pleasures are meaningless

Q 3: Why do you think that the desire of pleasures is unquenchable? What parallels in history and today do you see in the world and in your own hearts and lives? Do you agree with the Preacher, and what examples can you recall from history and now of other people who came to the same conclusion, and what did they do about it?

We are greedy and avaricious and selfish. That is the Fallen Creation for you! You cannot take it with you! We live with a sense of short-termism. We live to make wealth, we sometimes provide for our progeny, but what is it we leave, really? Too much wealth so often means so much unhappiness and dissatisfaction. Stand back, and assess our own lives. Invest in the happiness of others.

Chapter 2 vs 12-16 Wisdom and Folly are meaningless.

Q 4: the comparisons between Wisdom and Folly lead the Preacher to conclude that both Wisdom and Folly have the same outcomes for the individual. In what context do you think he is saying this? What parallels today are there?

We are all born and we all die – of that we can be certain! What we think is good for us can end up bad for others. We cannot foresee the outcome of our actions, good, bad or indifferent, in the long term. 'Those who forget their past are condemned to re-live it' (George Santayana)

Chapter 2 vs 17-26 Toil is meaningless.

Q 5: The Preacher engages with the issue of building an empire which others must then succeed to when the builder is dead and gone. The Preacher sees only folly in this. What examples are there is history that describe the Preacher's musings? What parallels are there today? What should our attitude be to labour and toil in the same contexts? What is our hope for the future in the work of our lives? Do you think it is pointless?

Much as Q4. Look at Psalm 8 – Ponder the universe and Creation – what are we and what is our purpose in existence? To praise the Creator, to Work for our Bread and be happy and contented in that, and to be happy in the contentment of others.

Chapter 3 vs 1-22 'A Time for Everything under Heaven'.

This chapter opens with a very well-known text, famously made into song by Bob Dylan.

Q 6: Vs 1-8: Look at each line and discuss how you may think that the comparisons between building and pulling-down fit in to an ethical and godly way of life. Do you think they do? Does it really matter anyway?

These things have to be set into context. That is what the Preacher is saying. War is occasionally necessary in order to curb greater evil in humanity. That is not to say that it is desirable, but rather, inevitable because we are Fallen people in a Fallen world A time to pull down and a time to build – yes, some things just build up 'organically' and become a tangle – literally and metaphorically. So we have to reassess, tear down and build afresh. A time to Love and a time to Hate – sadly, yes. We cannot be ambivalent about wickedness or the purveyors and perpetrators of it. But above all, 'The Law of the LORD is perfect' and the 'Testimonies of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple'. 'Love the LORD thy God..... and love thy neighbour as thyself.'

Q 7: Vs 9-15 *Be content in toil, and rest*. What do you make of this passage concerning Work and Labouring? What are the real benefits to all of this?

Q 8: Vs 16-22 *Our fate is just like the Animals*. What message is being propounded here? What should our attitude be towards life on Earth, and what aims should we have, individually, collectively and as created beings? What comforts should we derive from this outpouring of seeming pessimism?

Q7 & 8 – Take time out to love life, to take wonder in it, be awed by it, and understand the folly of our furious lives in seeking after the wind. That does not mean we are to be dreamers and wastrels, but live our lives with an eternal perspective.