

Eccles 1, 1 – 11, Luke 9, 7 – 9 Thur 24 Sept 2020, Zoom

*Yours is the breath that calls to life,
our emptiness and dust.* These are lines from a hymn by
Elizabeth Thomson that we sang on Sunday two weeks ago.

Our two readings today are not an obvious match, but let's try
to fold them into our present world, and feel for the breath that
calls to life.

First, what do you make of this gloomy Teacher, or Preacher,
the writer of Ecclesiastes – and his emptiness and dust?

He is **the** grumpy old man. *Vanity of vanities. All things are
wearisome.* Nothing satisfies. The sun goes round and round:
which evokes lovely poetry in the Psalms. *The sun delights as a
bridegroom out of his chamber, and rejoices as a champion to
run his course.* Our teacher has no romantic soul– it is the same
boring old sun for ever and ever. There is never anything new.
All is vanity, *futility* perhaps. In the verses that follow, the
Teacher moans about all the energy and study he has invested
in gaining knowledge and wisdom – *I perceive that this also is
but a chasing after wind.* (If you will forgive the vulgarity, long
nights spent in study are as fruitless as pissing in the wind). Not
encouraging for bright eyed students today. But grumpy old
men today, in newspaper articles and on our screens, enjoy
saying things like this. Enjoy, yes. There is something self-
indulgent in this teacher's cynical grumpiness. I know, because I
too can enjoy being grumpy: **cynical** about the world and the

people around me, not least my leaders. They are not my
proudest moments.

A gloomy preacher, but we also have a perplexed ruler today,
King Herod. The snippet about Herod comes within something
momentous. Jesus had sent his twelve men out two by two, to
travel light, to *proclaim the gospel of God, and to heal.* Luke
then slips in these verses about Herod, before telling us how the
apostles on their return told Jesus all they had done. Although
Luke gives no details, clearly they did have stories to tell, and
wanted to tell him. They are far from grumpy. Jesus took them
away with him, and withdrew privately for a bit.

They are ready for a rest. They had been travelling light on
Jesus's orders: no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, not even a
spare tunic.

Here is a modest and probably unintended link with the idea of
a cynic. Around the time of Jesus and after, there were
wandering teachers who were called **Cynics**. But they were not
cynical in our modern sense of the word. Their philosophy, at
its best, emphasised the insignificance of the present material
world and its goods. They lived in poverty, wandered and
taught wherever people would listen. Luke might be hinting
that the twelve, in their pairs with no staff or bread or cash,
looked like preachers of this kind: and perhaps they were
sometimes so understood. The philosophical ideas of the
Cynics, in this sense of the word Cynic, will have an honourable
and lasting influence in Christianity. The ideal of the simple life,
renouncing the trivial for the sake of the eternal.

Herod had heard about all that had taken place. Herod had his spies. Word was getting about: just because the apostles in their pairs, and many others less formally, including women, were *proclaiming the Kingdom of God, and healing*. Some may have seemed like wandering teachers of the Cynic style, but there was more. Hence the speculations that Herod has picked up: these ones are different. *Is John the Baptist back from the dead?* Herod is perplexed, and for good reason troubled. We shall hear the same guess again when Jesus speaks to the disciples themselves: Herod's perplexity about the new movement previews a much deeper conversation to come. *Who do **you** say that I am,* Jesus will ask them?

Where is this all leading me? To treasure the intricate threads within the weave that make up our Hebrew and Christian Scriptures alike. The grumpy old man of Ecclesiastes is not yet proclaiming the Kingdom of God. But he is real. I know him well. He is part of the earthy weave which the Kingdom of God recognises, claims, and must transform. *Your kingdom come on earth, as it is in heaven.* The disciples in pairs are our pioneers today, when there is much to make us fearful, and we are easily paralysed by cynicism of the kind that the teacher in Ecclesiastes shows. The apostles, frail as they are, are beginning to transform the world. People are noticing, including Herod.

We sang as a hymn two Sundays ago a wonderful poem by Elizabeth Thomson, our former priest. One stanza begins exactly from the old teacher's gloom - and ours - *our emptiness and dust, the endless void of chance.*

*Yours is the breath that calls to life
our emptiness and dust,
and in the endless void of chance
you are the ground of trust.
Turn us from nothing into love:
enable us to trace
in wilderness and pain and cross
the body of your grace.*

This is transformation: Turn us from *nothing into love*: Vanity into Good News and abundant life.