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The Harvest of the Heart's Work (Ecclesiastes 3.1-8)

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In the ancient Jewish liturgical calendar, the book of Ecclesiastes is linked to harvest festival – the Festival of Sukkot. And, in light of the passage we just heard, this seems at first glance appropriate. There's a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted... the sense seems to be of a reassuring seasonal round, the rhythms natural to mortal life oscillating through cycles of beginnings and endings, rejoicing and sorrowing, planting and harvesting. And yet, when read as a whole, Ecclesiastes turns out to be not such a reassuring book; nor is it particularly festive. In fact, far from experiencing the cyclical round of life comforting and sustaining, the text overall finds this recurrence futile and pointless.

'Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher' at the beginning of the first chapter; 'All is vanity. What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun? ... The wind blows to the south, and goes around to the north: round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns ... What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun' (1.2-3, 6, 9). According to the narrator, the Teacher, whose disillusioned monologue constitutes the book of Ecclesiastes, even the human pursuit of wisdom is futile: 'it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with', he maintains. 'I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind'. That is, things don't ever really get better, they just cycle around ... times of building followed by times of destruction, peace followed by war. There's a kind of fatalism here ... this is just the way the world goes.

Walter Brueggemann notes that Ecclesiastes is in 'profound tension' with the general direction of Israel's faith which is usually suffused by a sense of ultimate meaning, purpose and moral coherence, even in the midst of suffering. There's a

‘troubled restlessness in this text’, he says.¹ Maybe all *is* ‘vanity’, pointless. Maybe life on earth *is* nothing more than an endless round of striving followed by disappointment, seeming gain followed by dissolution.

Which means there’s a strange juxtaposition in the use of this text at this time of year. Jewish scholar Marc Brettler says that harvest was the festival of joy par excellence² – a festival that spoke of fulfilment, accomplishment, ripening and the gift of rest in which to enjoy the fruits of one’s labour. But liturgically, it was marked by a scripture that speaks of futility, and the absurdity of any sense we’re achieving anything or getting anywhere. Says another commentator: ‘Set against the gaiety and plenty of the holiday, which commemorates the ingathering of the harvest, the shadows cast by the book of [Ecclesiastes] lengthen and darken’.³ What is going on here? What are we to make of this tension?

Interestingly, even before I read these commentaries, I’d been aware of this tension as a lived experience – as I know have many of you. We’re gathering to celebrate our harvest, knowing all the while that in Ukraine, spring planting has been impossible and there will be no harvest there next year; we’re gathering for a festival, even as several members of our Benedictus community grieve the very recent deaths of family members, and others among us are suffering over the illness of children, grand-children, nieces, nephews and friends, as well as their own. We come to give thanks for provision and the earth’s bounty, even as the earth lurches closer to ecological collapse. It’s hard to feel happiness unalloyed in the midst of all this. And I wonder if the deep wisdom of the Jewish liturgical calendar is its determination to be faithful to this difficult whole, its commitment to deny neither grief nor gladness but to hold the two together, inviting us to do the same.

So what might this look like in practice? Perhaps, to begin, it’s important to recognise which side of this tension we ourselves find most difficult to honour. I’ve

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville, KY: WJK Press, 2003), pp.333, 329.

² Marc Zvi Brettler, ‘Feast of Booths (Sukkot)’ in *Bible Odyssey* (<https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/passages/related-articles/feast-of-booths-sukkot>).

³ Daphne Merkin cited in Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, p.333.

said that the tradition of reading Ecclesiastes at harvest means we're not allowed to forget the realities of disillusionment, sorrow and pain, as we celebrate the good times. But equally, the yearly celebration of harvest means that suffering, and the sense we sometimes feel of futility aren't allowed to eclipse the realities of blessing and gift. For some of us, it's not sorrow we find it hardest to remain present to, but joy. 'The poor women at the fountain are laughing together between the suffering they have known and the awfulness in their future, smiling and laughing while somebody in the village is very sick'. These lines are from Jack Gilbert's poem, *A Brief for the Defense*. And Gilbert continues: 'We must risk delight. We can do without pleasure, but not delight. Not enjoyment. We must have the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless furnace of this world'. But how do we hold such tension, such juxtaposition, such painful awareness of the whole? Here, I believe, both contemplation and community are necessary.

Contemplation has been described as 'a long, loving look at the real'. It's the practice of contemplation that expands the capacity of the heart to see things whole and to bear what we see. This is because in meditation, we entrust ourselves wholly to God and find ourselves held – held in One in whom we live and move and have our being. Over time, this practice liberates us from old habits of self-preservation and self-protection. This allows us to attend to the truth of things, even when it's painful, even when the nightly news shows images of bombed cities or flooded towns, or someone close to us is overwhelmed by grief or fear. And equally this liberation from habits of self-preservation allows us to risk delight, to dare to accept our gladness and those surges of hope that can arise against all reason, almost frightening us.

In just this way, the Dutch Jew Etty Hillesum was able to remain present to the suffering of those imprisoned with her on their way to Auschwitz and simultaneously to the wonder of the world: 'This morning there was a rainbow over the camp and the sun shone in the mud puddles', she wrote to her friend Maria.⁴ And she was glad.

⁴ Etty Hillesum, *Letters from Westerbork*, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans (London: Grafton Books, 1988), p.102.

And again: 'The misery here is quite terrible; and yet, late at night when the day has slunk away into the depths behind me, I often walk with a spring in my step along the barbed wire. And then time and again, it soars straight from my heart – I can't help it, that's just the way it is, like some elementary force – the feeling that life is glorious and magnificent, and that one day we shall be building a whole new world'.⁵ Contemplation means we can bear and be present to the whole of it.

As for community – well, it's participating in community – whether family, neighbourhood, church – that makes us aware of the continuously interweaving realities joy and suffering, gratitude and loss. Someone's life turns a corner, while another's is plunged into chaos; someone loses a beloved parent or spouse while, just down the street, a new life comes into the world; struggle persists next door to unexpected grace. And when it all feels too much, when we feel unable to hold it all, it's sharing the burden with loving others that sustains our capacity to keep on with it. It's community that creates the space for us both to celebrate and to grieve, and thus to be ministers of wholeness in our world.

Over the past few weeks, we've been focusing on the image of Benedictus as a kind of ecosystem – a 'waterhole' where each of us may come to drink and be replenished, where each may contribute to the capacity of this community to sustain and seed life, to give and receive shelter and encouragement in our sorrow and our joy. In a way, then we've been celebrating what Michael Leunig calls 'the harvest of the heart's work':

Seeds of faith planted with faith;
Love nurtured by love:
Courage strengthened by courage.

And we have been giving thanks for:

The bitter and the sweet;
For that which has grown in adversity
And for that which has flourished in
warmth and grace.⁶

⁵ Hillesum, *Letters from Westerbork*, p.77.

⁶ Michael Leunig, 'Autumn', *When I Talk to You* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2004).

So as we give thanks for the harvest of our gardens, let us be present also to the harvest of the heart's work in our life together, and let us be willing to share what we have and to bear what we can, for the love of the whole.