

Succeeding In The Rat Race

Series on Ecclesiastes

When something big happens in world news, the TV channels love to bring in some “expert” to give us informed analysis of what is going on. When a lone Norwegian went on a shooting rampage, the major news channels pulled in counterterrorism experts on Al Qaeda, who pronounced that it had all the hallmarks of an Al Qaeda attack. Wrong. This last week has been full of experts speculating on the possibility of the USA defaulting on its huge mountain of debt. The thing that gets me is that they never say “now we are going to speculate on what has happened here”. It’s always presented as “we have the inside information – and we know”. What is presented as informed opinion is often just speculation. But we love this stuff, because we live in the information age, and we just have to know. We have this craving to know what is going to happen, so we turn to the experts who are glad to inform us about future trends. Historically, there have been some classic pronouncements by experts that have turned out to be wonderfully wrong. Eight years before the first successful operation for stomach cancer in 1881, British surgeon Sir John Eichen pronounced that “the abdomen, the chest and the brain will forever be shut from the intrusion of the wise and humane surgeon”. In 1943, the chairman of IBM, Thomas Watson, predicted there would be a world market for about 5 computers. The British Astronomer Royal, the top astronomer in the UK at the time, said in 1956 that “space travel is utter bilge”. And Robert McNamara, the US Secretary of Defence said in 1963 “The war in Vietnam is going well and will succeed”.

The Seduction Of Control

Because we have learned to control so much of our world, by harnessing the power of rivers, building highways, harnessing the energy of the sun, defying gravity through flight, extracting oil from deep underground, devising chemicals and medications, and a myriad of other scientific achievements, we have come to believe we can do anything. Advertising creates the idea that we can control our lives. All we need to do is buy this product, eat this kind of food, and avoid this sort of drink. We no longer need to be victims of our frailty and mortality. We can define ourselves and shape ourselves to become the sort of people we really want to be. We are constantly urged to believe in ourselves, and better ourselves so that we make ourselves, or remake ourselves in the image that we want to be. You can have the body you want. You can have the education you want. You can have the life you want. All you have to do is set goals, work hard for it, and you can have it. We have become a generation of control freaks. Not only do we try and control everything that happens in our own lives, we set about to try and control everyone around us as well. It’s a very seductive idea, that we can control life to make it suit our agenda.

Andrew Delbanco is a humanities professor at Columbia University. When he was doing some research on Alcoholics Anonymous he attended an AA meeting in New York. At one meeting, a smartly dressed young man was talking about his problems. His narrative was absolutely faultless. All his problems were due to the injustice and betrayals of others. He spoke of how he was going to avenge himself on all those who had wronged him. He talked about needing to take control of his life. He talked about needing to believe in himself. Everything wrong with his life was someone else’s fault. While he was speaking, an African American in dreadlocks and dark shades leaned over to Delbanco and said ***“I used to feel that way too, until I achieved low self esteem”***. The smartly dressed young man didn’t get what the black man with dreadlocks understood – that while we think we are in control, we are lost. It’s only when we admit that we are not in control, that we begin to understand what life is all about.

Live Realistically.

If ever there was a generation that needed to read the book of Ecclesiastes it's our generation. In his journal Solomon keeps pushing, pushing and pushing us to live realistically. He keeps saying to us through the pages of his journal "face life as it is, but not as you wish it were. Stop believing your own publicity. These are the inescapable truths of life. Don't bury your head in the sand. Be real!" This is truth from a man who has been in the rat race, who has lived life in the fast lane, who has made it to the top. He's literally been the King of the castle and he's passing on some wisdom to those who are taking the same route. So let's listen to some more of Solomon's conclusions about life.

"I have seen something else under the sun: The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favour to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all. Moreover, no man knows when his hour will come: As fish are caught in a cruel net, or birds are taken in a snare, so men are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them". (Ecclesiastes 9:11& 12)

So what does he say? He's saying – "as I have lived my life I have noticed that the race is not to the swift, or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise, or wealth to the brilliant, or favour to the learned." Hey, hey, hold it right there Solomon. That's not what we learned in business management. We were told the way to make it in this world – the way to success – was to work smarter, go faster, get stronger, be more competitive, think more cleverly than the opposition and plan more wisely. We were told to get up early and go to bed late and to make our jobs our top priority. Don't get sentimental about home and family. Leave Christianity to the women and kids. The race is for the swift, the strong, the clever. The favour is for the highly skilled.

Garrison Keillor is an American author, storyteller, humorist, and radio personality. He hosts a radio show on Minnesota public radio, where he reports on happenings in a fictional town called Lake Wobegon. Lake Wobegon is characterized as the town where "all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average". It's the way we begin to believe life is. We live in this Pollyanna fantasy where we think all our kids are above average, and all the men are handsome. If you think that is true, come and look in my mirror.

Is Solomon Right?

Is the race to the swift? You only have to watch the Olympics to get the answer to that question. The runner in the lead who trips just before the tape and loses the chance of a gold medal. The diver with cramp who belly flops in front of millions of viewers. The pole vaulter who misses the vault and crashes spectacularly to the ground. The track and field athlete who gets spiked just as she is about to take the lead. The walker who tries just a little bit too hard coming into the stadium and is disqualified for having two feet off the ground at the same time.

Is the battle always won by the strong? The most sophisticated, technologically advanced, best trained and best equipped army in the world was beaten in Vietnam by a nation of determined guerrilla fighters wearing coolie hats. Does wealth and favour always come to the brilliant and the learned? Sometimes it does, but life doesn't come with guarantees. It doesn't matter what area of life you look at, life is full of uncertainties. You don't know if you will have good health this time next year. You can't be certain of your job. You can't be certain of your relationships. You can't even guarantee that you will be alive tomorrow. Solomon says life is so uncertain that we are like fish caught in a net, we are like birds in a snare. Nothing is predictable. None of us know when our time will come.

Lyn and I lived in a community about the size of Nyon for 11 years. We made friends with a lot of people in that time. I made a point of buying tyres for my car at the same tyre company so that I could build a relationship with a couple of bright young men who were doing very well in the tyre business. Their prices and customer service was excellent. Business was booming. Over the years I had got to know these two by their first names. One day I called in to get a tyre fixed and saw there was a new man working there, so I casually asked "where's Shane today?" He said "Shane was killed three months ago. He was driving too fast on a wet road, slid into a traffic island and that was it." We talked about that for a bit and then he said something else that I haven't forgotten. He said "Nothing much has changed here. We are all still the same. We just drive a bit slower." There is an unreality about the way people live. My best friend kills himself but I don't stop to ask myself "what's life all about?" I just drive a bit slower.

Are you on Information Overload?

You and I are living in the information age, and we are suffering from information overload. I read this week that the amount of data being stored is doubling every 18 months. And on a personal level, we have emails to answer, virtual friends to pester on Facebook, YouTube videos to watch, and in the physical world – meetings to attend, and papers to shuffle. So many professionals are welded to their smartphones, they can't go out to dinner, go to funeral or hold a conversation without having to check on the latest bit of information. Is a dopamine squirt they have become addicted to. We have the information highway running right through our living rooms, but there is so much information, and it's going so fast, we are not catching it and having a wild ride. We are getting run over by it. We are not hitchhikers on the information highway. We are roadkill. We are living at a time when we have never known so much and understood so little.

Seek Wisdom.

There is nothing wrong with acquiring information, but the bible encourages us to seek wisdom. Listen to these next verses from Ecclesiastes.

"I also saw under the sun this example of wisdom that greatly impressed me: There was once a small city with only a few people in it. And a powerful king came against it, surrounded it and built huge siege works against it. Now there lived in that city a man poor but wise, and he saved the city by his wisdom. But nobody remembered that poor man. So I said, "Wisdom is better than strength." But the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are no longer heeded. The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouts of a ruler of fools. Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good". (Ecclesiastes 9:11 – 18)

In ancient times, it was understood that there was a set of Godly values that were built into the fabric of the universe. If you violated that set of values there were consequences just as severe as if you violate physical reality by putting your hand into a fire. The path of wisdom was to learn to live according to Gods values, developing Godly character such as humility, compassion, courage, discretion and loyalty. In other words, learn to adjust your life to the ways of God.

But all that has been reversed. Ultimate reality is no longer seen as a supernatural order, but as our natural world. Instead of trying to shape our desires to fit the reality of God's purpose for our lives, we now try to shape our reality to fit our desires. Instead of living our lives to conform to the standards of God, we now seek power and control so that we can be god. We see ourselves as god, and we try and make life adjust to us.

I want to finish with a question that I ask myself as much as I ask you. How much of your week do you spend seeking information, whether that be time watching the news, or on Facebook or Twitter, or surfing the net? What if we spent an equal amount of time this week seeking Godly wisdom? Reading Gods word. Reading Christian books. Thinking about the issues of life. Time in prayer.

Asking God for wisdom and understanding rather than just seeking knowledge. What if we made a conscious decision here today to adjust our lives to the ways of God. Wouldn't that bring about a great transformation in our lives? Here's a verse to meditate on this week.

"Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your heart on things above, where Christ is seated at right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things" (Colossians 3:1-2)

*David McChesney
Westlake Church in Nyon, Switzerland*