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VANITY OF VANITIES, IS ALL VANITY?

by D.B. Knox

"The Protestant Faith"

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"Vanity of Vanities" says the preacher "all is vanity". These are the opening words of Ecclesiastes, and have a very modern ring. To the writer, life seemed meaningless, everything repeats itself aimlessly; the sun rises, the sun sets, the seasons come and the seasons go, men are born and die and no-one remembers them. He had also tried the pleasures of life and found them unsatisfying; he had then gone in for money making only to reflect that at the end it all has to be left to someone else who has not worked for it and who is likely to dissipate what has been accumulated.

Vanity of vanities, is everything vanity? That is the question. Is life worthwhile? In the short term we may have our objectives, for example, to complete our education, to start our family, to pay for our house, to build our fortunes. But what of life itself, was not James right when he said our life is like a cloud that appears in the sky but as you look at it it disappears; a vapour that vanishes leaving no trace. James has the modern business man in mind when he comments on the lack of our sound basis for the rat race. He describes the business man as "Today we will make money in this city and next year in that," but James asks what is your life, it is no more than a vapour that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. What we should say is "if the Lord will, we shall both live and do this and that" (James 4:13-15).

Meaning for life can only be established by relating our life to reality. But what are the realities of existence? If one looks at the bookshops one would think that sex is the ultimate reality or at the counter-culture one would think it experience, induced by drugs, but James has put his finger on the point, the Lord the Creator is ultimate reality. When Paul preached to the secularised society of his day he always began by emphasising that God is the sovereign Creator of heaven and earth and everything in it. He was speaking to people who had lost any meaning in life. The Graeco-Roman world thought that world history consisted of an endless series of cycles, each repeating itself

without purpose or goal and that everything was governed by fate. Or if a person was somewhat sophisticated he believed that everything was the result of chance, the very opposite of fate. But neither a belief in chance nor in fate has room for any concept of personality or purposefulness in the ultimate reality on which life is based, and so it is hard to find any meaning in life; but the Christian gospel brings quite a different world view to the fore. God is sovereign, God is creator, God is personal, He controls all the events of life and He will complete His purposes. We find meaning for our lives as we relate ourselves truly to God Who is the true ultimate reality.

A personal Creator implies not only purpose but also assessment and judgement, and at this point we react because we are aware that we are not truly related to God the Creator. We do not acknowledge Him with the praise and thanksgiving that is due; we do not seek to do His will; we make ourselves the centre of our thoughts, and our own wishes the guide for our decisions. We are aware that we disregard and disobey what we ought to do. Not surprisingly, therefore, men have always sought to thrust the concept of a personal Creator out of their minds, either by adopting idolatry in which God is made in the shape of an animal or a statue or some other absurdity, or in modern times by seeking to deny the very existence of the supernatural and regarding man as the apex of all that is. The popularity of such books as "Honest to God" or "Jonathan Livingston Seagull" (books slight in themselves but which banish the supernatural) is a sign of how anxious people are to get rid of the supernatural from their thoughts; either by religious considerations, as in the former book, or by philosophical existentialism as in the latter, or again, by scientific theory as the continuing popularity of the theory of evolution witnesses. Nevertheless, God remains and for our life to be meaningful we must relate ourselves truly to God, His character, His will and His purpose.

The Bible not only makes clear that God is ultimate reality but also draws to the centre of the picture the very remarkable characteristic of God, that He is other-person centred. God is not only sovereign Creator but He is also Love; this is true within the Godhead Himself. Jesus taught that the Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hands (John 3). And also of the Son Jesus said "I do always those things which please the Father" (John 8:29). Here we have two remarkable statements of Jesus which complement each other and which establish the fact that the Godhead is other person-centred. The Father loves the Son and gives everything to Him, the Son in response finds the centre of His will in the Father - He does everything that pleases Him. This other-person centredness is the essential character of God and is the basic principle too of creation. God finds the centre of His interest in His people, just as the husband finds the centre of his life in his spouse, and the bridegroom in the bride. These are biblical descriptions of God's relation to us and convey the truth that He is other-person centred. God delights in His people; they are His portion, His inheritance, His field. This agricultural imagery drawn from the life of Palestine compares God's care for us to the farmer's interest in the farm which he has inherited from his forefathers. It is the centre of his interest and he tends it with all his skill and care.

If we are to find meaning for our lives we must adopt the same principle of being other-person centred. For it is the basic principle of creation. We must find our centre in the Lord and in other people, for His sake.

Fellowship is the synonym of finding your centre in other people. Friendship is another synonym. God created us for fellowship with Himself, and this brings with it not only happiness now, but unspeakable bliss and riches throughout eternity. God expressed the truth that He finds His centre in His people in the remarkable event of the incarnation when God became man and related Himself

so completely with us that He took our nature and lived our life in order that He might be in the closed fellowship with us and we to Him. It had been foretold in the Old Testament when the prophet Isaiah said "unto us a son is born, unto us a child is given and his name shall be mighty God, everlasting father", "Emmanuel", that is, God with us. This prophesied relationship became actual in the life of Jesus who was Emmanuel, and who told those who were listening to Him "before Abraham was, I am". But it is important to notice that in coming into this relationship with us in Jesus God came as our Saviour, for it was not possible for Him to be related to us in any other way since by nature we are sinners and estranged from Him. He came, then, as our Saviour, sin-bearer, and our re-creator.

The atonement of Christ on the cross which we commemorate this week is the centre of human history, the central act of creation through which God came into that intimate relationship with man which involved Him in being not only a man among us but our Saviour in order that as forgiven we might be in relationship and fellowship with Him throughout eternity. As the angel predicted at His birth "you shall call his name Jesus, (that is, Jehovah Saviour) for He shall save His people from their sins".

God delights in His people, who through the cross He forgives and re-creates. His people are His portion, His heritage, with whom He is in fellowship through His spirit and we are in His presence through that same Spirit. We are, that is, in heaven where He is and we will never leave it. Nothing, not even death, can separate us from His presence and fellowship, for He is greater than all. Death can only involve us in fuller experience of His presence.

So in reply to the question "is life empty, is all vanity, is all emptiness?" the answer is a resounding "NO!" for the gospel (or news) we have to proclaim is the news of the unsearchable riches that are to be found in a relationship with Christ, the saviour, God with us.

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