

Far from home



Books of the Old Testament *Ecclesiastes*

by Richard Greatrex

Richard Greatrex takes the baton to continue our book-by-book series about the Old Testament.

Ostensibly, Ecclesiastes lays out the life-knowledge of a post-exilic Jewish sage, known only as "Qoheleth", the "Teacher", and so it sits uneasily alongside Proverbs and Job as wisdom literature. Like them, it attempts to make sense of life based on observation and practical experience, offering a path for successful living.

Qoheleth's opening words are startling and memorable – "Vanity of vanities... All is vanity" – spiking our complacency, before coaxing us through twelve short

chapters of collected and at times contradictory sayings that challenge our preconceptions of work, pleasure and meaningful existence.

Written before the possibility of life after death had formed into Jewish doctrine, Ecclesiastes can be perceived as unremittingly bleak. But Qoheleth is no one-dimensional preacher. He chimes with contemporary concepts of mindfulness when he reminds us "Better is a handful with quiet than two handfuls with toil", cautioning us to live in the moment and appreciate the life God has given us.

Richard is a rural rector, writer and artist who lives in Somerset, where he chases dragonflies and steam trains. ☺

“Prayer is a declaration of dependence upon God.”

Philip Yancey (born 1949), author

Lisa Tulfer *reflects on* Isaiah 56:1. 6-8

Today's reading from Isaiah was written in the context of exile. The people of God, abducted by the occupying Babylonians, struggled to preserve their cultural and religious identity far from home. For them, salvation and deliverance were envisaged as a return to the promised land, a restoration of religious practices and an ongoing right relationship with God.

But if we too are being called by God to "Maintain justice, and do what is right," what form might that take today? And what then might salvation and deliverance look like? We live in a world where, like the Israelites in Babylon, huge numbers of human beings are exiled, driven far from home by war, poverty and geographical

disaster. For them, God's salvation and deliverance might be revealed in opportunities to rebuild their lives, either through returning home or in a new place. In our own society, too, there are exiles, marginalised from the wider culture through intergenerational poverty, who teeter perilously on the edge of survival between benefits, food banks and loan sharks. For them, what might salvation and deliverance look like, beyond enough to get by this week?

This, then, is Isaiah's challenge to us. If we are to be the means by which God's salvation and deliverance are revealed to the world, what then is required of us to maintain justice and do what is right? ☺

Just and righteous God, help us to recognise your children who are in exile. Show us how to maintain justice and do what is right, that your kingdom may come and your salvation and deliverance be revealed. Amen.

National Parks *The Yorkshire Dales*

by Jo Jones

Jesus spent the days teaching, and each evening he withdrew to the nearby hill (Luke 21:37). National parks were set up near large centres of population and part of their purpose is to provide people with access to the beauty of the countryside. They are there for us withdraw to – to have our minds and bodies swept clean by the winds, refreshed by the views.

I stayed in a stone cottage in the Yorkshire Dales in summer. I went to an eclectic range of concerts, part of the Swaledale Festival, in between walking tracks across the high moors, listening as I went to the bubbling calls of breeding curlews, and the plaintive peewit of plovers. In the valleys my breath was taken away by hay meadows rich in flowers, my heart full as I watched butterflies flit between them.

Heaven on earth and – like God – there for us.

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