

Today's first reading is famous for what you might call its punchline: 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.' It is so famous in fact, that in the middle centuries of this millennium, there was a special genre of painting: they were still-lives, usually a table covered in objects associated with human activity – particularly enjoyment. A jug of wine, musical instruments, playing cards, mirrors, expensive hats or gloves – and on the same table there was always a skull. This sort of painting was called a 'vanitas'. I have one on a wall in the house – I painted it myself, a copy of a 17th century musical vanitas... because that's what I do. Copy – forge, even.

The illustration on the second page of the newsletter is by an American turn-of-the-century illustrator called Charles Allan Gilbert: it shows a double image (sometimes called a 'visual pun' in which the scene of a woman admiring herself in a mirror, when viewed from a distance, appears to be a human skull. The title is also a pun, because this type of dressing-table is also known as a vanity-table.

The Book of Ecclesiastes is known in Hebrew as Qoheleth, a Hebrew word that means 'preacher'. The title in Hebrew comes from the opening verse: 'The words of Qoheleth, son of David, King in Jerusalem.' It is actually written as a biography – even though he mentions himself only once, right at the beginning, it's an account of his life experiences and how, looking back, they all seem a bit pointless. Tradition says that the author was King Solomon. because he was the direct son of David and he was

king in Jerusalem; it's a nice idea, but unfortunately Solomon lived in the 10th century BC, while the Book of Ecclesiastes can be dated to the 4th or 5th century BC. This biography reminds the reader that wisdom has its limitations and is not our main concern. Qoheleth reports what he planned, what he did, experienced and thought, but in the end his journey to knowledge is incomplete; the reader is not only to hear Qoheleth's wisdom, but to observe his journey towards understanding and acceptance of life's frustrations and uncertainties: the journey itself is what is important.

There has always been scholarly disagreement about what the Book of Ecclesiastes is actually saying. Scholars have never been quite sure whether it is positive and life-affirming, or deeply pessimistic – I know which one I'd go for. Some passages of Ecclesiastes seem to contradict other parts of the Hebrew Bible, and even itself. The Talmud suggests that the rabbis considered censoring Ecclesiastes because of these apparent contradictions and confusions. The themes of Ecclesiastes are the pain and frustration caused by suffering and injustice in the world, the uselessness of human ambition, and the limitations of wisdom. The phrase "under the sun" appears twenty-nine times in connection with this. Agatha Christie even used it for the title of one of her books: 'Evil Under the Sun'. Qoheleth means by this that just as without the sun there could be no life, there can only be death without reverence and respect for God.

My brother, partly at least because of his life in a small craft on the high seas, has almost no wants. He has needs, of course –

but if he doesn't need it, he doesn't want it. If he was a believer he's be a natural ascetic. I'm exactly the opposite: most of the time, even if I don't need it, I'd probably want it. It's in my nature to enjoy things – especially books. I'm even happy to give things away – except books, alas. I'm always happy to share them with other people, so there's nothing selfish or miserly about it. On the other hand, I know that all things will pass – including me. I accept that. And that's the deepest message of the Book of Ecclesiastes, I think: enjoy and value the experiences, the relationships and the things in your life – and thank God for them – but always know that, like everything in this world, they are only temporary. The English poet and mystic William Blake said the same thing for our time in a little poem written at the turn of the 18th century:

'He who binds to himself a joy
Doth the winged life destroy.
He who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in eternity's sunrise.'