

## Sermons at All Saints Anglican Church of Luxembourg

### A sermon by Rev Geoff Rad for Remembrance Sunday 2024

#### Bible text: Ecclesiastes 1:12-end

You know it's really autumn in Luxembourg when the mist and fog come rolling in

You can be driving along in sunshine one moment and the next suddenly you are into mist – unable to see, disorientated

It happened to me the other day on the road out to Echternach – a bank of fog ahead that made actually entering none the less disorientating

There's a great word for this sort of disorientating experience in our first reading from the book of Ecclesiastes

It's the Hebrew word: *Hevel* - something that is fleeting, like vapour, fog, smoke, wind

It has a solid appearance like fog, or we can feel it like wind: but when you reach out to grasp it, to use it – it disappears in your hand

Its an enigma, a paradox

At the opening of Ecclesiastes, we find these famous words: vanity of vanities – all is vanity

Or *Hevel of Hevel*, all is *Hevel*

Ecclesiastes is one of the Wisdom books of the Bible. It doesn't give instruction in how to do wisdom. Instead it invites us to drill down to find the bedrock for wisdom, that on which we can live life well whatever our circumstances

Through a character who is called The Teacher the book holds up a mirror to what it means to be a human being and all the different ways human beings interact with each other and the world around us - and crucially, how we make sense of this

This character, the Teacher, considers

- relationship and family
- creativity, work and business
- social and political structures – in that day monarchy and in ours all the strengths and weaknesses of democracy and party politics

He also considers the why and what of the breakdown and break up of human relationships – between individuals and nations

He also looks at the philosophies and religion of his day, the beliefs and the practices

In other words, the Teacher looks at the different contexts of our lives in which we human beings seek to make sense in an instrumental way, so we can better predict and possibly even control life

As we seek to shape and bring order to life from the personal to the local to the global our own innate, human wisdom and technology is truly important – negotiation, vision, self-sacrifice, the insights and practical fruits of the scientific method

But then we suddenly find ourselves in a *Hevel* moment – not unlike, I guess, how many here feel as we digest and seek to make sense of the outcome of the US election, or the apparent risk of the fragmenting of tried and tested organisations like the EU and NATO, the continued rise of the right

Faced with such moments, the Teacher, the one who (it says) surpasses all who have gone before comes to this conclusion ...

“I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun: and see, all is *hevel*, a chasing after wind”

*Hevel* is about drilling down to our fundamental presuppositions, our world view

It's not pessimism, it's not nihilism, it's not fatalism – for *Hevel* is often created by the accumulation of human choices

And part of the dignity of being human is to make meaningful choices for which we are accountable

*Hevel* is about understanding the backdrop against which we do all of this

It is actually an invitation to realism: to do life with our eyes wide open to the fact we ultimately are not in control in the way we might like to believe

Life is tentative, provisional. There are no guarantees or rights to it being how we want or envisage it should be

It's only when we have this as our foundation that we can do the real work that this Remembrance Sunday invites us to do

To come with deep gratitude for those who chose and choose to step into the terrible uncertainty of war as combatants

and also to come with deep sadness for those who found and find themselves plunged into conflict as innocent civilians

To rightly honour and mourn both

Remembrance Sunday also invites us, crucially, to recognise and own our part in what makes such self-sacrifice necessary and innocent suffering so tragically possible, our contribution to *Hevel*

To understand with sober and humble awareness what it means to be human – both our responsibility for creating and our limitations in controlling the things of life, the *Hevel*

As we pause to remember today we look back at a history of *Hevel*, those movements and moments, those times when we, as individuals and societies took conscious or unconscious steps to wrongly place short-term gain over the long-term perspective and doing the right thing

But we also pause to remember the way in which out of nowhere we are surprised by goodness, self-sacrifice, hope

... and, I believe, by God somehow still working out His overarching good purposes despite the appearances of *Hevel*

The Teacher in another wisdom book, Proverbs, says this of our coming to terms with *Hevel*: The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (9:10)

“Fear” is better understood as like coming to stand on a rock before God with our bewilderment – owning the reality that from our human perspective life is like *Hevel*, but trusting that from God's He is still shaping history - however *Hevel* it may seem

How do we do that?

I believe that each one of us can come and stand in this way today, in the midst of our current personal and global *Hevel*, when in a few moments we say these familiar words in prayer, in the Lord's Prayer : Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.