



July 31st

THE NEW SHOFAR

Life is mostly froth and bubble, some things stand like stone, kindness in another's trouble, courage in our own (Adam Lindsay Gordon).

Vanity! Vanity! All is vanity!

I have often wondered why we do not read often from the Book of Ecclesiastes in our Sunday celebrations. Perhaps it is just too close to the bone in its outlook on life... *Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity (1:2)*. All? Somewhere ahead of us, and we do not know just where, there is a boundary we will not cross. It is the mark that is our death, a mark that reminds us of how life is limited by time... *seventy years or eighty for those who are strong* is one way the psalmists speaks of it. Today, however, this is a subject rarely acknowledged. By pretending it does not exist, people are able to find time to do and to build the things they hope give meaning to life that convinces them it was not all a waste.

Our life is meaningful, we will say; we still have much to be done. We need to get on with our families, our retirement, those projects that mean so much to us. We can't die just yet! Or, that other person in our lives must not die just yet. There is our work and importantly those last years we will spend together in blissful happiness with the one we love, and then, after a long and full life we can go to our rest. We like to believe there is goodness and love and beauty and purpose in life, and it is all so wonderful and we are all so grateful. But death knows nothing of these things so important to us... *I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and chasing after the wind (Ecclesiastes 1:13)*.

The Psalmist likewise laments. *For we see that the wise die also; like the dull and stupid they perish and leave their wealth to those who come after them. Their graves shall be their home for ever, their dwelling place from generation to generation, though they call the lands after their own names (Psalm 49:9-11)*. There is, it seems, no relief. Maybe, if you have billions to waste there is always the futile hope offered by cryogenics. Wait in a freezer until they work out how to bring you back again! Telling the parable about a rich man who pulled down his barn to build larger ones for his grain and goods and his planned retirement of relaxing, eating, drinking, the stark words of Jesus still ring out today: *But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you.*

But you're in the death zone too you know!

I had not imagined my life in that way but the humorous words above thrown back to me one day have an undeniable truth to them. I am in that zone where I have more life behind me than I have in front of me. My aches and pains would give me a good ranking at the local Senior Citizens Club and, I joke back, I have the funeral director on speed dial.

The statistical proximity of death (though I am planning for the big 100 and the royal letter) reminds me of the futility of striving to build bigger barns, or barns of any size. There is no time left to waste on *vanities* but that was hard to sell to a younger me. What I pray for now is that my life continues to be full and exciting, enriched by the joy and companionship that comes with participating in the life of the Body of Christ. I want to be ministering to the “end” for the only things that are not vanities are those things we do in collaboration with Christ, those areas of our lives we live under the reigning of God.

We can do nothing about death. It waits. It wins. *We can never ransom ourselves, or deliver to God the price of our life; (Ps. 49:6-8)*. We cannot do anything about avoiding our inevitable fate, but God can and God has. In death God transforms life, he does not end it. He transforms it through the ministration of Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. God loves us and raises us up in union with Christ. He is our hope and that hope is to be found in things over which we have diminishing level of control. Our hope is in submission, in letting God do what God is best at. Love. This love is tender and strong. *It was I who taught them to walk, I took them up in my arms . . . I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks (Hosea 11:3-4)*. With such love, Christ went to his death and *descended into hell* in order to defeat the enemy and to set captives free. Christ broke the bonds of death and removed the sting of death, raising us up in union with him. *So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God . . . for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God (Colossians 3:1-3)*. Strip off the old self and let Christ be all in all. Christ is our life, our undying life, the revelation of who we are. Not what we have in our “barns”. That is decoration that impacts not in the next life.

So then, what does this have to do with the rich farmer?

We are Christians. We are God’s children, brothers and sisters of Christ and that means we cannot sit back like the rich man and say, *I’m done. Good job. Indeed*. True, there was a moment when the Lord Jesus did say, *It is finished*. But what did He then go on to do? After His death, He rose again, spent forty more days teaching His disciples, ascended bodily into Heaven, sent His Holy Spirit to empower the Church, and continues to be actively with us, working in us and through us for the salvation of the whole world. Given all this, what is our mission through until the day we die? *Our mission in life is to be on a mission*.

While the world has difficulties understanding and appreciating the dignity, value and wisdom of those who are in what my rude friend calls the “death zone”, for God age is meaningless. For God there is no young and old, male or female, Jew or Gentile. They are all very much tags for this life, this earth. In God we are all His children *in Christ*.

It is the living and dying “in Christ” bit that helps us cease in our pursuit of *vanities* and keeps us in the realm of grace and graciousness, ministering and serving, doing all God wants us to be doing in keeping our lamps filled with oil and our wicks trimmed ready to go out and meet the Bridegroom. We are never resting in “God’s waiting room” anticipating the end. We remain on a mission, even in dying, even in breathing our last breath.