

“SO WHAT’S NEW?”
Ecclesiastes 1:1-11; 2 Corinthians 5:11-20

It’s a new year, a new start. We may have made resolutions, resolving to do things differently, to approach life, or parts of it, with a new enthusiasm, a new commitment. We will have new experiences and find ourselves in new settings maybe. It’s all going to be new. But how new? How new is 2014 going to be for us? This time next year we’ll be looking back over 2014 and, I suspect, seeing that the same things have happened. We may find ourselves in a new relationship, but how different will it be from any others we’ve had? We may find ourselves in a new job, but will it be any different from the way we’ve been trying to fund the same old lifestyle this past year? We may find ourselves in a new home, but we’ll still have to clean it, decorate it, heat it, secure it. We’ll almost certainly find ourselves at different times in very different contexts from this year, but the same old stuff will be happening to us, the same old anxieties, the same old dilemmas, the same old issues will be there to occupy us and worry us, both on a personal level and on a global level.

Which is pretty well what The Preacher Man is saying in the words we read from *Ecclesiastes* just now. (*Ecclesiastes* is a Greek rendering of the Hebrew title *Qoheleth*, which means The Preacher Man, by the way. Some people have also translated it as The Quester.) This book is a collection of thoughts and aphorisms about life. It can seem a bit jumbled and incoherent at times, but it’s a bit like, for example, Pascal’s *Pensées*, a scattergun look at life, with a few wise words thrown in. And if you read through it, you’ll find that the little phrase which appears a couple of times in this first section keeps turning up throughout the book – “*under the sun*”. “*Under the sun*” is a Hebrew phrase which is paralleled in Greek by the word “*cosmos*”, or “*worldly*” in our English translations. These are thoughts that are taken from a secular standpoint. The Preacher Man is echoing what he hears in the world around him – people who are looking at life without too much attention to the spiritual, the eternal – without too much attention to God.

These are thoughts born of a world weary frustration with the way things are. Nothing ever changes. In more recent times Justin Currie wrote a song performed by Del Amitri which seems to reflect the same way of looking at life:

*Post office clerks put up signs saying position closed
And secretaries turn off typewriters and put on their coats
Janitors padlock the gates
For security guards to patrol
And bachelors phone up their friends for a drink
While the married ones turn on a chat show*

And they'll all be lonely tonight and lonely tomorrow

*Gentlemen, time please, you know we can't serve anymore
Now the traffic lights change to stop, when there's nothing to go
And by five o'clock everything's dead
And every third car is a cab
And ignorant people sleep in their beds
Like the doped white mice in the college lab*

*Nothing ever happens, nothing happens at all
The needle returns to the start of the song
And we all sing along like before*

*Bill hoardings advertise products that nobody needs
While angry from Manchester writes to complain about
All the repeats on TV
And computer terminals report some gains*

*On the values of copper and tin
While American businessmen snap up Van Goghs
For the price of a hospital wing*

*Nothing ever happens, nothing happens at all
The needle returns to the start of the song
And we all sing along like before
Nothing ever happens, nothing happens at all
They'll burn down the synagogues at six o'clock
And we'll all go along like before*

And we'll all be lonely tonight and lonely tomorrow

There's nothing new, looked at from this perspective. Eugene Peterson translates vv9,10 as follows –
*What was will be again, what happened will happen again. There's nothing new on this earth. Year after year it's the same old story. Does someone call out, "Hey, **this** is new"? Don't get excited – it's the same old story.*

Fashions come and go. (I've been wearing a pullover that many people have remarked kindly upon, because it's the kind of thing that has started to come back into fashion – but Sally knitted it for me over 30 years ago. I knew it would come back into fashion one day!) The veneer on our private and community lives might change and get a makeover, but the underlying stuff remains the same. It's only the actors and the scenery that change; the pattern of history remains the same. Rudyard Kipling wrote:

*The craft that we call modern;
The crimes that we call new;
John Bunyan had them typed and filed
In 1682.*

Looking at life like this, it's all closed system endlessly repeating itself. 2014 will be pretty well the same as 2013, as 1964, as 1814 – as whenever. Man, that's depressing! And the thoughts of The Preacher Man continue very much in that vein. It's all meaningless. There's no point to it, because it all seems the same and it all ends up the same ... until the last few sentences of this book, when The Preacher Man springs a bit of surprise. In the penultimate verse of the book (12:13), he writes, "*Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.*". If you want something different, if you want a way out of this, well start taking God into account. And that's where he leaves it.

But in the New Testament, St Paul picks up on it. Paul was a good Jew (so he tells us again and again), so he would have known all about The Preacher Man. And even if he didn't, he would have been very familiar with the cynicism and frustration expressed in his book – certainly having heard it from the people around him, and almost certainly having sensed some of it himself at times. He was human, after all. Where The Preacher man signs off, Paul picks up – again and again. He starts off this little section of his second letter to the Christians in Corinth by saying, "*Since we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men*". We've got an alternative way of looking at things, he's saying. Start to take God into account and you can see it too.

Of course, Paul was writing after God had demonstrated his love for humanity so clearly and so definitively in Jesus. The gift of Jesus, the teaching of Jesus, the death of Jesus, the resurrection of Jesus – that all changed things for humanity. Look at vv14,15.

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

God set all that up so that we can now look at life from a different perspective. We no longer have to see things “*under the sun*”. Or, as Paul puts it, “*From now on we regard no-one from a worldly point of view*”. And that is so radical a shift in the condition of humanity that it’s like starting all over again. Start taking God into account, get yourself hooked up with the Messiah, with the Christ, with Jesus and things start to look very different indeed. As *The Message* puts it: “*Anyone united with the Messiah gets a fresh start, is created new. The old is gone: a new life burgeons*”. And that “*new*” really does mean NEW!

It means new possibilities. It means new horizons. It means a new outlook on life, a new point of view. It means that the lenses of cynicism and frustration can be replaced with the lenses of hope and optimism. The same old stuff will be going on around us, but we see it all in a very different light. No longer is this a closed system of determinism and fatalism. No longer do we have to put up with a particular view of history and politics and economics and science and so on. No longer is there a constantly repeating pattern of behaviour into which we have to fit ourselves. There are now possibilities that embrace the spiritual, the eternal – that take into account God and his amazing love.

Being reconciled to God in Jesus – accepting his offer of new life, of a new kind of life – allows us to face the future, not with the hopelessness of the past that expresses itself in that cry of “*Meaningless*”, that forces us to look at life as a kind of absurd and pointless existence, but with real hope, with a vision of complete transformation. That transformation has already begun in the lives of those who choose to tread that path. As we’ve been seeing in our reflections on Matthew’s Gospel recently, this is what the Kingdom of God is all about. Jesus has already inaugurated that Kingdom. We can catch glimpses of it in our world, and in our lives as we begin to experience it through our faith in Jesus Christ. And one day we believe it will be fulfilled in a way that will leave us open-mouthed in astonishment at the newness of it all – at the awe-inspiring, heart-stopping, gob-smacking glory of what we believe God has in store for us. 2014 will not be meaningless. 2014 will be another stage in that amazing renewal of our perspective on life, it will reveal new facets of God’s love for us, it will open up new horizons of service and worship for us – if we are prepared to take God into account.

Will you go into the new year, into 2014, saying “Utterly meaningless. All is meaningless – this is just the same old same old”? Or will you step out with Jesus saying, “I am a new creation” and looking at the world from a new perspective, looking forward with hope and joy to a transformed future which can begin this very moment?

If you’ve never really thought about that before and you think you’d like to follow it up – or if you’ve been stuck in the way of thinking that The Preacher Man was reflecting, and you’d like to find a way out – then what better way to start this new year than by talking to someone about it. Have a word with me or with someone you know who looks at life with God’s help this morning – maybe over coffee after this service.

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Questions for discussion

1. Is it really true that there is nothing new under the sun?
2. What do you find frustrating about life? Why?
3. How does "fearing God" change our perspective on life? Can you give any examples of that in your own situation?
4. What does it mean to be "in Christ" (or "united with the Messiah")?
5. Share some of your hopes (and fears) for 2014 and pray for one another.