

## SCRIPTURE & WELLBEING

### 3 Heat of the day

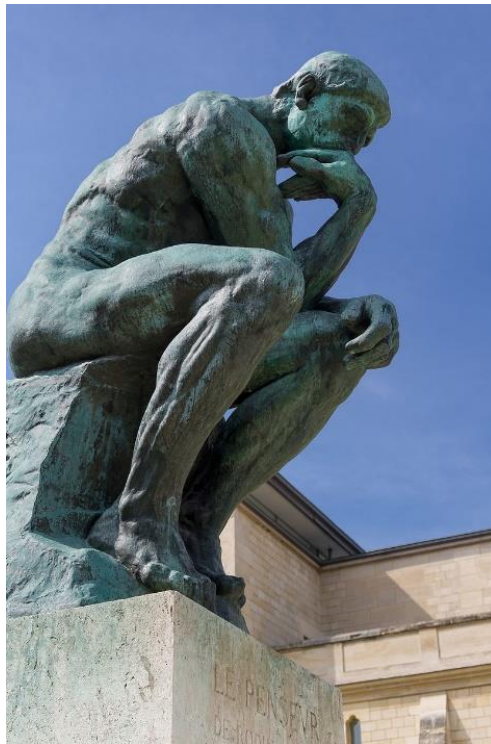
Today we're exploring whether busyness might mask emptiness with a focus on some of the Wisdom literature to guide us along the way.

#### Pray

*'God of peace, teach me what it means that "our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you".<sup>1)</sup>*

#### Scripture

*In everything you do be moderate, and no sickness will overtake you. Ecclesiasticus 31:22*



#### **The Thinker by Auguste Rodin, 1904.**

Bronze statue in the Garden of the Musée Rodin, Paris.  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The\\_Thinker\\_close.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Thinker_close.jpg)

*The Thinker* is a bronze sculpture by the French artist Rodin, and is one of the most famous artworks in the world. There are 28 versions of this sculpture on show today. The work depicts a male nude figure sitting on a roughly hewn rock. As he rests his chin on his right hand, he leans forward with his muscular body in contemplative thought.

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<sup>1)</sup> St Augustine, Confessions, chapter 1. Penguin Classics (new edition), 2002.

## Reflection

'Seize the day!'

'Remember you must die.'

Those were the two defining mottos of the Baroque age: live life to the full before it is too late. Extravagant churches sporting gilded columns and chubby angels, the voluptuous vacuity of Paul Rubens' nudes, the genius of Handel spent on pompous royal entertainment – they all embody an exuberant party mood which conceals the flipside of the shiny coin: the reminder of inescapable death.

Of course, there is nothing wrong as such with being active or enjoying life. The question is, when does activity turn into restlessness and restlessness into exhaustion? When does pleasure become addiction? At what point does the noise drown out the emptiness? When does ecstasy serve to soothe the pain?

It would seem fair to say that the contemporary Western world is fundamentally baroque in character and has the 17<sup>th</sup> century motto 'Seize the day' written all over it. The focus is on the here and now. Busyness, ambition and enjoyment make up the secular holy trinity, at least among those whose highest aspirations are to produce and consume happily ever after. As firm beliefs in God, eternity and moral absolutes dissolve, self-actualization, the choice of pleasures and the pleasure of choice rule the day. No doubt, Sirach (also known as Ecclesiasticus) would diagnose lack of moderation as the quintessential Western disease, whilst St Augustine would locate our restlessness in our spiritual muddle.

None of this, though, is new. Take this passage of Scripture from what a friend called the first postmodern book, *Ko'helet* in Hebrew, or *Ecclesiastes* in our English Bible translations:

I said to myself, 'Come now, I will make a test of pleasure; enjoy yourself.'... I made great works; I built houses and planted vineyards for myself; I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house; I also had great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and of the provinces; I got singers, both men and women, and delights of the flesh, and many concubines. So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem; also my wisdom remained with me. Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

*Ecclesiastes 2:1; 4–12*

Asceticism is rarely found in Judaism; God's creation is celebrated and enjoyed. Significantly, Jesus turned water into wine, not the other way round. Ecclesiastes doesn't deny the goodness of creation, nor its enjoyment, but asks, when the dust settles after the heat of day, is this all there is? Does all the work and play have any lasting significance? If there's nothing at the centre to hold everything together, do we end up like the crowd in Lowry's painting below: rushing, aimless and disconnected?

Today's relentless pursuit of enjoyment and success not only reflects a society drifting in spiritual relativism and apathy, but can seriously compromise our wellbeing at an everyday level. Who hasn't occasionally longed to escape the rat race, looked at their pressured lives and asked the rhetorical question: 'Really ...?' It's not that God isn't with us in our busyness, he is always with us. However, we can lose ourselves, and our anchor points, quite easily if our life is out of balance. When we're distracted by the noise we don't always hear God calling us home.

As we noted earlier, the baroque motto, 'Seize the day!' was countered by another: 'Remember you must die'. The origin of 'Seize the day!' is 'Carpe diem' from the Odes (23 BCE) of the Roman poet Horace. In a sense, it is about living mindfully in the present as tomorrow can bring death or disaster. So since our time here is short we should use it well.

These days, the reality of a pandemic has brought the former dinner table taboo to the forefront of our conversations, as we seek solace in talking about the unspeakable which surrounds us like never before. Yet, death in a figurative sense can be equally painful: when dreams are buried, a relationship ends, a lifetime ambition fails to materialise, or a deep longing is never fulfilled.

Death – literal or metaphorical – can heighten the sense of ultimate futility. Aeons before the Baroque and present-day eras, the author of Ko'helet puzzled over this conundrum:

For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity. All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knows whether the human spirit goes upwards and the spirit of animals goes downwards to the earth? So I saw that there is nothing better than that all should enjoy their work, for that is their lot; who can bring them to see what will be after them?  
*Ecclesiastes 3:19–22*

The inclusion of Ko'helet in the Hebrew canon of Scripture was contested by some. You can see why. There seems to be no grand divine masterplan, no focus on the beyond, where all will be resolved and everything will become clear. The book's conclusion recaptures some sense of divine order, but the fact that it diverges from what went before may suggest that it was added by a later hand.

Scripture is neither a step-by-step manual nor a seamless manifesto. It is a rich, multifaceted narrative that doesn't plaster over life's existential cracks. Ko'helet makes us ask tough questions and refuses to give glib answers.

So, for the purpose of today's session, let's bear the tension of the unresolved and face Ko'helet's enigmas squarely without rushing for instant solutions. And let's ask ourselves to what extent society's frantic activity and pleasure-seeking, driven by the fear of death, might have an undue hold over our own lives and compromise our spiritual wellbeing.

## **Pray**

*'God of life, when my past achievements no longer count in the present, when hopes are dashed and disillusionment sets in, and when the spectre of death threatens to annihilate all meaning, meet me in my fear and turmoil. Amen.'*

## **Reflection and action**

Take time out to think about your priorities in life. Ask yourself: 'If I had only one more year to live, how might this change my priorities? What would I start, or stop, doing immediately?'

In the coming days, try to listen to your deepest desire and ask what it might be telling, or indeed asking you.

Take time in prayer and Scripture reading and reflect on God's priorities.

## Reflection on the painting



### **Going to Work by L.S. Lowry, 1943.**

Oil on canvas. Imperial War Museum North, Salford.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Going to Work - L S Lowry.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Going_to_Work_-_L_S_Lowry.jpg)

Lowry's painting shows factory workers going to the engineering firm, Mather and Platt, in Manchester in a haze of white air which was originally thought to be snow, but is in fact, the effects of industrial pollution. It was commissioned by the War Artists Advisory Committee of the UK government at the height of WWII, who wanted to acknowledge the importance of heavy industry in the war effort.

Lowry is celebrated for his portrayals of busy urban landscapes in the north of England filled with stylised figures referred to as 'matchstick men'. His distinctive perspective with crowds converging to a central point creates the atmosphere of rush hour frenzy and the feeling of imminent collision on the way to work.

Instead of accuracy of line and features, Lowry gives us the imagination of the daily grind. We are swept up in this melee of anonymous people, all hurrying to be on time; too fast to stop and chat, since factory working keeps strict rules or pay is deducted in the race to fulfil the production line. Without a glance, this corner of England earns its keep on yet another stressful day.

For landscape painting, it is odd not to provide any clues about the weather or shadows around the people in their stride. Lowry saw his approach more in terms of dreamscapes than landscapes, which enabled him to be more fluid in what he wanted to emphasise – mood over reality. Yet in this painting, we are easily drawn in; we join the crowd and don't look back, otherwise we might just lose our step and be late for work all over again.

**Everything Has Its Time**

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

a time to be born, and a time to die;  
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal;  
a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh;  
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;  
a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;  
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;  
a time to seek, and a time to lose;  
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;  
a time to tear, and a time to sew;  
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;  
a time to love, and a time to hate;  
a time for war, and a time for peace.

**The God-Given Task**

What gain have the workers from their toil? I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him. That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what has gone by.

**Bible texts for further reflection**

**True riches**  
**Humility and simplicity**  
**The key to living wisely**

**Luke 12:13–21**  
**Matthew 19:13–15**  
**Psalms 90**

**Further reading**

A Blessed Life: Benedictine Guidelines for those who long for good days by Wil Derkse (translated by Martin Kessler), Liturgical Press, 2009.  
Inviting God in: Scriptural Reflections and Prayers Throughout the Year by Joyce Rupp, Ave Maria Press, 2001.  
Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life by Richard Rohr, Jossey-Bass Books, 2013.