

Connected

Speaker: Ben Whitnall

Date: 1 Oct 2023

Talk title: which way?

Bible verses: Ecclesiastes 12

What are the main points (no more than three!)?

[remember this whole thing is an attempt to serve up and open up an ongoing conversation, not resolve it down to a 'solved and dealt with' tidy takeaway lesson]

1. **Ecclesiastes paints a picture (for Ben at least) a very relatable feeling/situation:** drowning in a sea of overwhelm and futility ('what does it all meeeean??'), whilst also having a sort of 'come on, get it together' sense of the North Star you want to get oriented back towards ('fear God and keep God's commandments')
2. **However, what it very definitely doesn't do is give a fixed, fast and repeatable formula for how to get there or what that means.** It leaves it at 'draw the rest of the owl' status – a 'conclusion of the matter' that sounds incredibly simple but actually just opens on to a lifetime of figuring out what 'fearing God and keeping God's commandments' means and looks like and how to spend ever more of our lives in that space
3. **Ben's plea in response to this** – from feeling and experience more than from the passage, admittedly! – **was for us collectively as church to resist the temptation to strive for a simple, fast, fixed formulae** (we don't get given one anyway! And no one has ever lived a life like that. There's no suggestion it's possible or even desirable) and race to the top of the 'completed Christian life' hill ('I've drawn the whole owl, hurry up losers!'). Instead of looking to race ahead of the pack, to be continually circulating through it, as all of us take turns being the one lagging behind, with a limp, forgetting what an owl looks like, whatever metaphor you want. Be gracious and stumbling and sitting with one another in the sea of overwhelm sometimes.

Questions to prompt conversation...

- **Meta! Probably quite important to do first!**
 - If there's a spectrum from 'honest, messy, potentially embarrassing, lost' to 'neat, acceptable, convenient, leading to actionable next steps', where would you put yourself on it when it comes to things like:
 - - my conversation with God
 - - my account to myself of where I'm at with God
 - - what I think in/of church

- - what I say in small group
 - - when conversation somehow ends up on faith stuff with friends
- Ben used the example of sentences that keep agitatingly going up and opening up, rather than coming to a nice reassuring downward resolve. How often do you crave these 'closure moments'? You're craving it right now, right? 'Let me see the direction of this session so we can get through the bullet points, absorb the one productive takeaway and then get on (like watching one of those excruciating Health and Safety training videos. Yes, I get it, lift from the knees, can I go now?) Give me the steps, spell out a simple set of memorable actions, tell me an ABC to reliably follow to take me to feeling and doing better...'
- what would these discussion sessions look like if we were aiming to keep a continual circulation of listening to each others' struggles and uncertainties, rather than a linear 'progression' towards an agreed-upon 'conclusion'/closure moment?
 - How can we conduct the next 40 mins in that spirit of slow honest attentiveness (rather than rushing to a neat 'right' answer)? Can someone maybe keep an eye and ear out for when it seems like we're falling into that temptation and flag it up?
- **Qs on the text**
 - do you love or hate Ecclesiastes? Why?
 - how does the one line instruction to 'fear God and keep God's commandments' feel to you (right now, today)?
 - we're told to 'keep God's commandments' but with no further instruction on how. What do you make of that? (Do you think 'keeping God's commandments' is a stable, solvable problem – i.e. that it has a correct, knowable answer and the challenge is just to have the willpower to stick to it?)
- **Qs on the feeling**
 - have you ever felt like church is giving you a 'draw the rest of the owl' 'answer'? What was the situation and how did what you were told make you feel?
 - when was the last time you felt like you were in that 'sea of overwhelm'? (It might be right now, or 10 mins ago!) What prompted it for you?
 - do you relate to that experience of having a general handle on what the north star is ('fear God and keep God's commandments') but not necessarily knowing what that means or looks like day to day? How do you deal with that?