

“Very Good Value Indeed”
Ecclesiastes 1:12-18, Luke 12:13-21
August 4, 2019

Probably I have mentioned before that I have always felt different from just about everybody else. When I was being trained as a computer programmer, in our class of sixteen persons, the final exam seemed to prove it: my fifteen classmates programmed the solution to the problem set before us identically, while I programmed the solution completely differently from the rest of them. We all got to the same place in the end - both approaches proved to be valid. But upon graduating, I got the job because (I guess) even in COBOL, group-think wasn't valued very highly. At least, not at Aetna.

Part of my difference was, as most of you know, due to my linguistic upbringing, speaking French in a household where three of the four adults were native French speakers. This was in the suburbs of Chicago, mind you. And I must say I enjoyed being different. I still do. But there were some trade-offs, to be sure.

For one, growing up I had never really heard of Mother Goose. It wasn't part of my mother's repertoire in children's literature, I guess. Not until adulthood did I learn all about Rockabye Baby in the Treetop, Georgie Porgie Pudding Pie, and the Queen of Hearts who made some tarts ... all on a summer's day. I was about Kyle's age when I discovered the Chronicles of Narnia - and promptly treated myself to the entire set for Christmas, reading one book a night between Saint Stephen's Day and New Year's Eve, 1976. But it wouldn't be until Averill and Jamey came along around ten years later that I discovered Paddington Bear.

For those of you who are less than familiar with Paddington, he's a native of Peru, where his Aunt Lucy lives in the Home for Retired Bears in Lima. No longer being able to take care of her nephew, Aunt Lucy sent Paddington across the seas to London with a small suitcase and a sign around his neck which read “Please look after this bear; Thank you.”

Paddington is discovered in a London railroad station by the Brown family, who adopt him immediately, and thus begins a series of adventures, some of which center on the market in Portobello Road, where Paddington develops an eye for a good bargain.

In fact, sprinkled throughout the Paddington stories is the phrase, “Paddington decided it was good value - very good value indeed.” Of course, getting his money’s worth often involves minor disasters, such as spilt paint, broken tables, torn easels ... all because Paddington decided to become a model for an art class at Two Shillings an hour - about 25 cents. Still, as my dad used to say, Paddington had a knack for coming out of it all “smelling like a rose” ... but his adventures give us pause to wonder, “What IS very good value, indeed”?

Strange to say, the Book of Ecclesiastes asks the very same question. And it comes to some disturbing conclusions, finding that wisdom is vanity, wealth is vanity, good humor is vanity, labor is vanity, skill is vanity. To quote King Solomon: “I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun, and beheld the tears of the oppressed - they had no comforter. And on the side of their oppressors there was power - but they had no comforter, either. Wherefor I praised the dead more than the living that are yet alive; yea, better than them both did I esteem him that hath not yet been, who hath not seen the evil work that is done under the sun.”

So, what is good value in Ecclesiastes? Think of Solomon: he was rich, and he was wise - a nice combination that I’m sure any of us here would be happy with. Or at least we now think that we would be happy. But what did it do for King Solomon? His family life was a shambles, with his sons at each other’s throats - and as we know from history, this led to the Kingdom of Israel being split in two, between North and South, for the rest of their existence. The people of Israel, oppressed by sky-high taxes, were in open rebellion during Solomon’s reign. So what did Solomon’s wisdom gain him? What did his wealth gain him? He is long remembered, to be sure, but the memories are not all happy ones. If King Solomon had found something of very good value, he lost it, or let it

go, or didn't care enough to keep it. By all accounts, he died a failure. Unlike our dear friend Paddington, Solomon did not come out of it all smelling like a rose. At the end of his days, all he could counsel those who came after him was to say [Ecclesiastes 12:1-7]. Somehow a life that had begun so full of promise, a life that had everything going for it - he was heir to the throne, then King, renowned in this world - ended with the phrase "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity."

Jesus, believe it or not, echoes the same theme as King Solomon did. As we all know, Jesus was not anywhere near in the same position as the ancient King. Jesus was hailed as the Son of David, and so would be King, but his kingdom was not of this world. He was born in the royal city of David, but he had nowhere to lay down his head - even though birds had their nests and beasts had their dens. The ancient kings of Israel commanded thousands and ten thousands, while Jesus could only depend on the voluntary cooperation of maybe a few dozen disciples - and not all of them were completely trustworthy. So maybe Jesus couldn't speak from the same experience as King Solomon. But then, maybe Jesus didn't need to.

If anyone could have been as bitter as King Solomon, couldn't it have been someone like Jesus? Someone who was so convinced of the righteousness of his cause, and yet could not make anyone else see what he saw. Someone who saw evil all around, who himself was assailed during those forty days in the desert by the Prince of Darkness himself, and yet brought forth no real change in the social, political, and economic lives of his people. After all, Jesus could do nothing about the Romans, nothing about Pilate, nothing about King Herod, nothing about the Saducees and the Pharisees, except to so provoke them that they plotted his end.

Here was someone whose path, with very little doubt, would end up in tragedy - in arrest, imprisonment, beatings, torture, whippings, and an agonizing death. But do we ever hear Jesus say, Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. Do we ever hear him say, Life is tiresome, for there is nothing new under the sun. Did Christ ever utter the words Blessed

are the dead, for they have no need of a comforter ... which is all what in effect King Solomon said in his day.

What was the difference? What did Jesus see that Solomon couldn't see? What did Jesus have going for him that the King did not? What was it that could take an almost impossible situation and still have him say, Blessed are the poor, blessed are those that mourn, blessed are the meek, blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the pure? And how does that passage end??!? "Rejoice, and be exceeding glad, for great is your reward in heaven. Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

That is something that King Solomon couldn't see. Something that so many people today cannot see. What is of ultimate value? What, alone, is very good value indeed? What could cause one so pure to die an unjust death, what could cause so many of his followers to follow him to the same fate? What is it that could change something so ugly as the Cross into something so beautiful that it has become the symbol for so many, of all that is good, and true, and perfect?

A little girl once said it, when trying to recite some scripture she had once memorized. The words were not perfect, but her thought was right on target. "The Lord is my shepherd, and I don't need anything else."

What do we want? What do we need? What are we reaching for? What, for us, is very good value, indeed?

Let us pray: