

Sermon by Rev. Lusmarina Campos Garcia  
On Ecclesiastes 1-2 and Luke 12:13-21  
1 August 2010

T. S. Eliot wrote once that at the end of our long journeys, we will finally arrive to the place where we started. To journey throughout a whole life in order to arrive to the place where we started! Why do I think of T. S. Eliot when reading Ecclesiastes? It is because the two texts carry in themselves the notion that we cannot determine what happens to life, to the world, even to our own journeys throughout our own lives.

Does the wind have a back? How can we then chase after it? We can't. We can only receive it. We cannot produce it, keep it, bring it or run after it. We have no choice before the wind. When it blows, it touches us and reaches us whether we want it or not. We cannot refuse the wind. We can hide from it, but there is no action from our side that will interfere in its existence or way of blowing.

That is the point the Ecclesiastes text is dealing with: nothing of what we do can interfere or change the fundamentals of life and the universe. Obviously the author of Ecclesiastes didn't know about nuclear bomb, or the high levels of gas emission. But he knew of war, and of human nature. He might never have heard of tectonic plates but he knew there is an internal dynamic within the universe that doesn't depend on us, although we still like to believe we are the center of the universe. So he talks about the 'unreachables' and the 'impossibles' of our lives in order to bring us back into perspective, in order to confront our well established values with new motions, in order to ask what is essential in life and where our happiness comes from, in order to affirm God as the ultimate force connecting all things, defining all things, bearing all. I was impressed with the speech of Dr. Wolfgang Schäuble, Germany's Federal Minister of Finances when he spoke to the Lutheran World Federation Assembly in Stuttgart ten days ago and affirmed that the notion of God is fundamental in politics also, because politicians must work with the idea that there is a higher instance to which they are accountable to.

What is essential in life? What is not dispensable?

Is it work? Is it knowledge? Is it wealth? Power? The power to define what decisions will be taken or where a given process will end up? Is it health? Relationships perhaps?

Rubem Alves says: 'it is reading poetry with a group of friends'. Bonhoeffer asserts: 'it is to mean something to someone'.

Do I mean something to you? Do you mean something to me? What do we mean to each other?

Learning what we mean to each other is finding out what is essential in life. That is not necessarily an easy process, but it somehow brings sense to our lives. It is not always filled with happiness, but it helps us feel complete somehow. Finding out what is essential in life is not simple, it can be very complex and even painful, but it brings somehow a sense of fulfillment.

What is essential to us may not always correspond to what God considers as such. The gospel reading tells a story of a man whose wealth was essential to him. He accumulated goods, built larger barns and became richer and richer. He could eat, drink and be merry. He had enough to insure a future of plenty. And then Jesus brings a surprising ending to the story. The rich guy dies. No eating, no drinking, no being merry.

What was essential in his life didn't match with what God points as being essential for us. The author of Ecclesiastes would say, "vanity of vanities, all is vanity and a chasing after wind". The Hebrew word for vanity *hebel* signifies wind or vapor. The Latin word *vanitas/vanus* means empty. Vanity stands for transitoriness and emptiness; for what is not capturable, what vanishes.

We are used to think of vanity as something bad and often it is. The book of Ecclesiastes itself names many

distorted ways of living. The letter of Colossians presents a catalog of vices which includes those things that poison and destroy the relationships between people. But vanity is a word that stands for what vanishes, what ends. Reading throughout the entire book of Ecclesiastes, which I recommend, you will realize that everything vanishes, nothing remains. Not even that which is essential to us.

The challenge that both Ecclesiastes and the Gospel bring to us is to think of ourselves as a small portion of the universe, as people who cannot and should not try to control everything. By doing so, we may correct some of our behaviors, ways of thinking, acting, speaking, being a church together, being a society together, being a humanity together. And by adjusting what is essential to us to what is essential to God we may live choosing what is really important, what makes sense, what makes us happier, what makes us complete.

Saint-Exupery in his novel *The Little Prince* says that "the essential is invisible to the eyes". I agree, but not always. Sometimes, what is essential is right in front of our eyes. We need to learn to see.

We cannot interfere or change the fundamentals of life and universe, but we can choose to live in a way that we open ourselves to embrace new criteria and re-define what is essential for us. We are called to live our lives recognizing that God is the ultimate force connecting all things, defining all things, bearing all.

The wind doesn't have a back. We don't need to live as those who chase after it. And if after journeying throughout life we arrive where we had started, God will give us eyes to look at it and see as if for the first time.

Amen.