

Are you a glass half full or a glass half empty type of person?

A glass half empty person may not necessarily think of themselves as a pessimist but simply a realist. The world is not perfect, says the half empty glass person, and if things can go wrong they will – it is far better to recognise this fact than to live in a naively optimistic fool's paradise.

On the other hand, the glass half full person, believes that the world is essentially good and if we work hard and are honest, then things will turn out for the best. That was certainly the view of Charles Dickens' Mr Micawber – from his novel *David Copperfield*. Micawber worked for the unscrupulous Uriah Heap, and having exposed him as a fraud, emigrated with his family to Australia where he became a successful bank manager. Micawber's view of wealth and happiness was simple:

Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen six, result happiness. Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty pounds [n]ought and six, result misery.

Micawber's aphorism is reminiscent of the wisdom sayings of the ancient world to be found in Egypt, Babylonia and in the Hebrew wisdom tradition in the Book of Proverbs. Wisdom, or hokhmah (in Hebrew) or sophia (in Greek) asks a very basic question: How should I live my life in a way which will bring me happiness and success? The Book of Proverbs has an essentially optimistic view – work hard, be just and fair, live lawfully and you will be rewarded. Conversely, the lazy, indolent and unrighteous life will lead to poverty:

¹⁵ The wealth of the rich is their fortress;
the poverty of the poor is their ruin.

¹⁶ The wage of the righteous leads to life,
the gain of the wicked to sin.

(Proverbs 10:15-16)

This view has its advocates today especially in what is sometimes called prosperity theology, or the 'name it and gain it' kind of Christian evangelism as seen in televangelism in the United States. This simplistic form of theology promises the naïve that to be wealthy all they have to do is work hard, pray hard and they will be financially rewarded (and of course they must send lots of money to the church as sign of commitment).

But not only is there something distinctly dishonest about this view but it is just plainly wrong: those who work hard are not necessarily materially rewarded; those who are poor are not necessarily so because they are lazy. One solution to this problem is to think of true wealth as being 'spiritual treasure'. Thinking of it in this way means we can then say to the poor, 'you may be poor but don't worry because you will have spiritual treasure in heaven'.

Karl Marx rightly considered this mind-set to be a major cause of injustice as it provides a reason why we should do nothing to change society. Equally, Jesus' challenge to the rich young man to go sell his property and give to the poor also challenges the dangers of the spiritual riches view. The Lord's Prayer asks for actual bread for today, not spiritual bread for tomorrow.

Now whilst all this may be true, there is another view about wealth – the glass half empty view, as expressed by Ecclesiastes whose name in Hebrew is Qoheleth. It is tempting to think of Qoheleth as a pessimist. His favourite word (mataiotes) is 'vanity' meaning: 'devoid of truth', futile, folly, fruitless and empty.

Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. (Ecclesiastes 1:2)

But is he really a pessimist? I don't think so. Qoheleth's wisdom is that of the realist. Life is not all about work: the workaholic, the object of his criticism in today's passage, falsely thinks that all there is to life is to work hard. But that leaves no enjoyment of this world. It is exactly the same point Jesus makes in his parable of the rich man who spent a whole life accumulating wealth only to die before enjoying the fruits of his labour.

Qoheleth says:

What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? (Eccl 2:22)

Qoheleth's reply in chapter 4 is to work less, have less but enjoy life more.

Better is a handful with quiet than two handfuls with toil, and a chasing after wind. (Eccl 4:6)

Qoheleth would have strongly endorsed Jesus' message in his parable of the man and his barns. For, even the wisest person cannot know the future or predict with accuracy how life will turn out. As God says to the man in the parable, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you' (Lk 12:20).

Maybe Micawber's view of wealth was not so different from Qoheleth's. We need just enough to be happy; but life isn't all about gaining more and more. It's hard in a consumer age not to want the latest model mobile phone, computer gizmo or car, and there is nothing essentially wrong with these desires. The warning from Qoheleth and Jesus is how futile all these things are if that is all that one wants from life.

Just add up the number of times the man in the parable uses I or me – and you'll see why Qoheleth looks at people like this and despairs.