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May 25th: Ecclesiastes 11 & Acts 3:1—4:4

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Cast your bread upon the waters. The raising of the lame man at the Beautiful Gate.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>). My reflections are searchable by Bible chapter here: <https://audio.alastairadversaria.com/explore/>.

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Transcript

Ecclesiastes chapter 11. Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days. Give a portion to seven, or even to eight, for you know not what disaster may happen on earth.

If the clouds are full of rain, they empty themselves on the earth, and if a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie. He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap. As you do not know the way the Spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman or child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything.

In the morning sow your seed, and at evening withhold not your hand, for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good. Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun. So if a person lives many years, let him

rejoice in them all, but let him remember that the days of darkness will be many.

All that comes is vanity. Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes, but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment.

Remove vexation from your heart, and put away pain from your body, for youth and the dawn of life are vanity. Ecclesiastes chapter 11 explores what it means to act in a world that is radically unpredictable, where the vaporous character of life renders the outcome of our actions inscrutable. It is a chapter that is full of natural imagery.

Water, earth, clouds, rain, trees, wind, sowing seed and reaping grain, breath, bones and the womb, light and the sun. It begins with a verse that has given rise to several different interpretations. Casting one's bread upon the waters could, according to Craig Bartholomew, mean at least one of three things.

Many have taken it to be a reference to acts of charity. This is perhaps the most dominant of traditional Jewish readings. Others have seen the casting of the bread on waters as a reference to diversified trade.

Casting bread on waters is an image of sending out merchandise on ships. The supposed advice is to send out your merchandise on a number of different ships, so that, to shift the metaphor, all your eggs are not in one basket. A further reading that Bartholomew mentions is senseless action that is undertaken that can have unexpected consequences.

Whatever the meaning of the verse, it probably should be read in terms of verse 2, which is paralleled with it. The portion given to 7 or even to 8 may be an image of charity. Alternatively, it may be another way of speaking about diversified investments.

Not knowing what might befall any particular ship, it is the wisest course to divide your merchandise between a number of them. While Bartholomew favours this reading, William Brown finds it unpersuasive. No good merchant merely expects the return of his initial investment.

He hopes for some profit upon it. Referencing similar Arabian and Egyptian proverbs, Brown argues that this is a reference to doing good works. And he also points to Proverbs chapter 19 verse 17 as a parallel.

Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will repay him for his deed. Casting one's bread upon the waters is an image of surrendering control. It is an image also of uncalculated charitable action.

There is no knowing where bread cast upon the waters will go. To return to the governing image of the Book of Ecclesiastes, this is action willfully undertaken at the

mercy of the vapour. The person who casts his bread upon the waters is not trying to resist the vapour.

He engages in bold, enterprising and seemingly risky action, trusting in the mysterious operations of something else within the vapour. There is some inscrutable moral governance that makes this a wise action. Daniel Fredericks argues that we should not read this as an either or principle.

There is an image here of boldness and trade, but also of uncalculated charity. In both cases the actor is instructed to act confidently and with determination, even in a world of vapour. The person who exhibits uncalculated charity may end up being the recipient of such charity himself.

Natural events will happen when and how they will. They can't necessarily be predicted or foreseen. How they happen cannot be controlled, and when they happen they cannot be reversed.

Many have connected the image of the tree falling to death. Death has a finality to it, and the way that the tree has fallen is the way that it will lie. Once you have died the character of your life is out of your control.

There is no way to reverse the manner of your end. This may be an implication of the verse, but I don't think it's the primary meaning of it. More likely it refers to the way that the natural world operates beyond our sphere of control or prediction.

The earliest beginnings of life in the womb, for instance, are mysterious and veiled. They are an analogy to the world as a mysterious realm of possibilities and potential in the hand of God, whose outcome cannot be predicted. We cannot predict the movement of the Lord's spirit.

Life is uncertain, and we can neither foretell nor control the outcome of our actions. If we are looking for predictable results in this life, we will never act. Far better to act diligently throughout our endeavours, not having a misplaced confidence in the success of any of our actions, but making ample allowance for risk and uncertainty.

We ought to act boldly in the vapour, putting our actions and our deeds in the hands of God, who directs and disposes all things. Our days are transitory. We should welcome each dawn and recognise the gift that it represents.

The sun and the eyes by which we see it are pleasant and a blessing. We should be mindful of the days of darkness that we will also experience, days that as we will see in the chapter that follows, particularly are associated with the lengthening shadows of old age. Life, both in its sunny days and in its days of darkness, is short, is transitory, is vapour.

The preacher especially counsels young people to enjoy their youth. Youth and its pleasures are fleeting, but they are also good and should be enjoyed. While being spiritually circumspect, it is good for young people to follow their hearts and to delight in life.

God will bring all things into judgement, and perhaps one of the things that he will bring into judgement is a person's failure to enjoy life as they ought to. God hasn't given his gifts merely to test us and trip us up, but for us to enjoy. As we saw in chapter 9 verses 7-9, Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do.

Let your garments be always white, let not oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life, and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. Although God will bring all things into judgement, he is not a withholding God, he is a good and generous God, and he wants us to find joy in him and his gifts.

Youth in the early days of our life are fleeting, and so we should enjoy these days while we still have them, recognising that they will pass, without being mindless and spiritually unconcerned in our enjoyment. We should release our hearts from vexation and our bodies from toil when we can, and enjoy God's good rest. A question to consider, what are some actions that we can undertake that are forms of casting our bread upon the waters, which the preacher recommends at the beginning of this chapter? Acts 3.1-4.4 Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour, and a man lame from birth was being carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple, that is called the beautiful gate, to ask alms of those entering the temple.

Seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked to receive alms. And Peter directed his gaze at him, as did John, and said, Look at us, and he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. But Peter said, I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you, in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk.

And he took him by the right hand and raised him up, and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. And leaping up, he stood and began to walk, and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. And all the people saw him walking and praising God, and recognized him as the one who sat at the beautiful gate of the temple, asking for alms.

And they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him. While he clung to Peter and John, all the people, utterly astounded, ran together to them in the portico called Solomon's. And when Peter saw it, he addressed the people, Men of Israel, why do you wonder at this? Or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we have made him walk? The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of

Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release him.

But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and you killed the author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. And his name, by faith in his name, has made this man strong whom you see and know, and the faith that is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all.

And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled. Repent, therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago.

Moses said, The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers. You shall listen to him in whatever he tells you, and it shall be that every soul who does not listen to that prophet shall be destroyed from the people. And all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and those who came after him, also proclaim these days, You are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant that God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, And in your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.

God, having raised up his servant, sent him to you first to bless you by turning every one of you from your wickedness. And as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captains of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening.

But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand. The events of Pentecost were a witness to the resurrection and the ascension of Christ, and the witness of the apostles continues in chapter 3 and 4 with a witness to the power of Christ's name. The power of Christ's name is a witness to the fact that he is above all principalities and powers, all authority has been given to him, and the apostles who act with the power and the authorization of this name can do mighty deeds with it.

Beyond this development of the early church's witness, there is also a gradual movement towards increasing forms of persecution. In the previous chapter the disciples had been mocked by some of the people who had witnessed them speaking in tongues, but now they will be arrested and imprisoned by the authorities. The story begins with Peter and John going to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour.

The hour of prayer was associated with the hour of incense. This hour was also an hour that was important in Luke chapter 1, where Zechariah was serving in the temple at the hour of incense while the multitude of the people were praying outside. Later on we'll also see Cornelius praying at this time.

Prayer in the temple was a feature of the early church's practice. Although the Lord was establishing a new temple through his people after Pentecost, they were still worshipping at the old temple as well. There were overlapping administrations for this period of time.

The early Jerusalem church met from house to house but it also met on a regular basis in the temple, seemingly in Solomon's portico. This was a covered porch that would afford some sort of shelter and shade and would have been a very good location for semi-public meetings. We read about the early church's practice of prayer in the temple first in Luke chapter 24 verses 52-53.

And they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God. The hour of prayer, or the ninth hour, was about three in the afternoon, and this was one of the two hours of prayer of the day, the other being nine in the morning. It was also the time of Jesus' death.

While we are accustomed to see the three core disciples, Peter, James and John, here we have Peter and John, and they are paired here in chapter 4 and then also in chapter 8 verse 14. They seem to have a particularly close relationship. We see this also in the Gospel of John, especially in the concluding chapters, where Peter and John are juxtaposed with each other in a number of different ways.

The lame man is outside of the temple. Perhaps he's not able to get in, but more likely he's seeking alms from worshippers at one of the points of entry. Concern for the poor and needy was one of the things expected of the people of God, so it is understandable that the lame man would see this as a promising place to beg.

It isn't entirely clear what gate the beautiful gate was. Modern scholars more commonly identify this as the Nicanor gate, but we cannot be certain. The Shushan gate at the east is the more common traditional suggestion, and would fit best with Ezekiel chapter 47 verses 1-2.

The lame man requests alms from Peter and John. Peter is the one who responds. Throughout the Book of Acts, Peter is generally the speaking character of the apostles.

He responds saying that they don't have silver and gold, regular money, but he has something even better. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, he instructs him to rise up and walk. He takes the man's hand, he lifts him up, and immediately the Lord gives strength to his feet and his ankles.

The man's leaping recalls the prophecy of Isaiah chapter 35 verses 5-6, Then shall the

lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. In raising him up in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, there is a demonstration of the authority and the power of Christ through the miracle. Peter is confident in the power of the name of Christ and he appeals to Christ's authority in doing this act.

Such healings more generally serve as a testimony to the authority of Christ and to the truth of the apostles' message. Signs and miracles accompanying the apostles' message was a seal of the Lord upon the truth of what they were declaring. The people see him walking and praising God and they are astonished.

They recognize that this is the same man, lame from birth, whom they have seen at the gate of the temple many, many times before. They see the lame man praising God much as the disciples had praised God following the descent of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost. There the astonishment was that it was done in tongues not their own.

And here the astonishment is that a man lame from birth has been raised up in this sort of way. Perhaps their minds turn to the prophecy of Isaiah and think that this must be a sign of the kingdom. The miracle also recalls miracles that Christ had performed.

Christ had declared that his disciples would perform miracles greater than his. They are continuing his ministry and much as Elisha had continued the ministry of Elijah, doubling the number of signs that he had performed, so the ministry of Jesus is continued in the ministry of his disciples. Acting in the name of their master, it is Christ that is doing the sign.

It is Christ that is showing the power. In Luke chapter 5 verses 17 to 26 Jesus had forgiven and raised a paralyzed man. In John chapter 5 he had raised up a man at the sheep pool.

Seeing this miraculous sign the people all run together to the portico of Solomon. Presumably this is the place where Peter and John were going to pray. Perhaps they were meeting other members of the church there and might afterwards be teaching the people.

Seeing the multitude running to them, Peter delivers a sermon to the crowd. The miracle provides an occasion for explaining what God has done in Christ, a demonstration of his power and once again a demonstration of the authority and the truth of Christ. The people addressed are addressed as men of Israel and that will be important for a lot of the content of Peter's message here.

He will appeal to them as people who have received the promises that were given in Abraham, as those who have heard the words of Moses and the words of the prophets. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God of their fathers. From the very outset he wants them to know that

this is their Messiah that God has raised up.

This is not just a random person. This is the one that was promised for them and yet the very one that was sent for them they delivered over and denied. They denied him in giving him over to Pilate and insisting that he be killed and they denied him in choosing a murderer over him.

Peter refers to Jesus using key Old Testament terms. He is called the servant. He is the one who is foretold in the prophecies of Isaiah.

He is the holy and the righteous one. The righteous one again was mentioned in Isaiah chapter 53 and elsewhere. He is the servant, the holy one, the righteous one and also the author of life.

As either the prince of life or the author of life he is the origin of life. He is the one who gives life. He has life in himself.

Naturally it would seem to be a futile endeavour to try and kill this one. Indeed God raised him from the dead and the disciples and their mighty works witnessed to this fact that this has indeed taken place. The raising up of the lame man was not achieved by some miraculous power on the part of Peter and John.

It was achieved through the power of Christ's name and more particularly through the authority of Christ. It was by faith in this name, by faith in Christ's authority and power and goodness that the man was raised up. The raising up of the man demonstrates not only then the power of Christ but the efficacy of a faith that calls upon Jesus.

In the book of Acts there are a number of occasions where we see a sort of two visitation paradigm. Most clearly in the speech of Stephen. A deliverer visits the first time and is rejected and then comes again and is either accepted leading to great blessing for those who accept him or he is rejected leading to their doom.

Peter declares that the people acted in ignorance. They did not truly know who this one was. They did not realise that he was the one promised for them, that he was the servant of the Lord.

Throughout the Gospels there has been this element of a secret character to Christ's mission. Many scholars speak of the messianic secret especially in the Gospel of Mark. The full identity of Christ is not truly revealed until the very end.

It is only after the resurrection that we begin to understand who Jesus Christ really was. What they did beforehand then was an act of ignorance. On the cross Christ had called out for their forgiveness because they did not know what they were doing and now they do know they have the chance to repent, the chance to turn.

It is noteworthy that Peter particularly emphasises the theme of denial. They denied the Holy One, the Righteous One, the one that was sent for them as the servant of the Lord. This was the key sin of course that Peter himself had committed.

He had denied Christ three times and now he is the one who is sent bearing the message that the people who have denied Christ can be forgiven that sin. He particularly addresses the multitude here. The rulers were in great sin but the multitude bore their responsibility even though they were whipped up.

They played a very instrumental and willing part in condemning Christ to his crucifixion. However what they did was not outside the purposes of God. God foretold all of this by the mouth of the prophets.

We might think about passages such as Isaiah 53. The Christ would suffer and now God has fulfilled it and they are now given the chance to repent. If they turn back their sins will be forgiven them.

They will receive the benefits of the new covenant and times of refreshing will come from the presence of the Lord. This is an unusual expression but it seems to envisage some eschatological restoration of Israel. If they respond to their Messiah, if they receive him, then the fullness of the promised kingdom will be realized.

This is of course conditional. If they do not repent they will not receive this. We find this elsewhere in the New Testament, particularly in places like Romans chapter 11 where the expectation is that when Israel responds to the gospel it will be the full flowering and realization of God's purpose.

The Messiah has been appointed for them and if they repent the Messiah will be sent to them to bless them. However until the time for the restoration of all things has come Christ will remain in heaven. This restoration of all things has been foretold by the prophets throughout the Old Testament.

While many of the promises of the prophets are fulfilled in the church, many of them do look forward to something beyond that, to the restoration and the blessing of Israel, to the grafting in again of the natural branches, as the Apostle Paul might put it. Perhaps one of the biggest questions that's hovering over the whole of the book of Acts is will God restore at this time the kingdom to Israel? The Apostles hope that the people of Israel will respond, believing that if they do the time for the fullness of the blessing will have come. However as long as they fail to respond something crucially important still has not been realized.

As we go through the book of Acts we'll see that the vast majority of the Jews, save for a small remnant, do not respond positively to the gospel message. The disciples end up turning to the Gentiles. And all of this creates a very keen problem that Paul must

address within the book of Romans and elsewhere.

How can we account for the failure of Israel and what hope remains for them? As Stephen will later do in his speech, Peter here refers to the prophecy of Deuteronomy chapter 18 where God promised that he would raise up a prophet like Moses from among their brothers. The response, positive or negative, to this prophet would be decisive for the fate of the people to whom he was sent. Not only that, but this prophet was testified to by all of the prophets.

Every single one of the prophets from Samuel and those who came after him all spoke about these days that have come upon them. This is not just one more event within Israel's history. This is the climactic event.

This is the event that it was all leading up to. In raising the Messiah from the dead and exalting him to his right hand, God had marked out this one, this Jesus of Nazareth, as the one that all must listen to, as the one with all authority and power, to whom all knees must bow and every tongue must confess. The destiny of the entire people rests upon his shoulders and if the people are to be saved, it is upon him that they must call.

He is the one through whom all of the nations will be blessed. This is going to be a fulfilment of the promise of Abraham. But they are the sons of the prophets.

They are the sons of the covenant. God made the promises to their fathers and they are the ones consequently that God has sent this message to first. God has raised up his servant and he gives them the opportunity to repent, to turn, to be forgiven all of their sins and to be brought into the path of life.

The response of the authorities to the message of Peter is an angry one. Throughout the Gospels we see the fear that the authorities had about the crowd and the very great concern to maintain control over them. One of the particular concerns here is that the apostles are teaching the doctrine of resurrection.

The Sadducees in particular regarded this as a Pharisaic innovation and they opposed the doctrine and the fact that the early church taught this doctrine in the context of its witness to Christ's resurrection was a cause of great concern and annoyance to them. They put Peter and John in prison. However, the movement of the early church is already getting out of their control.

As people heard the word and saw the miracles, they believed and the number of the men came to about five thousand. Perhaps we might be reminded here of the feeding of the five thousand, in which five thousand people were committed to the charge of the apostles. After the apostles had returned from their ministry of announcing the coming of the kingdom to the towns and villages, Christ had instructed them to feed the flock of the five thousand and now they have a new flock.

Perhaps the earlier multitude with five thousand men anticipates this multitude with five thousand men. From the way that Christ had empowered them miraculously to feed that multitude, he would empower them to feed this multitude also. A question to consider, what parallels can you see between the account of the raising of the lame man in this chapter and the raising of the lame man in Acts chapter 14 verses 8 to 10? What lessons might Luke be wanting to convey through this?