

**MONDAY**  
**30 MARCH****Susannah 1-9. 15-17. 19-30. 33-62****[or 41b-62] or**  
**Joshua 2:1-14****Psalms 23****John 8:1-11****TUESDAY**  
**31 MARCH****Numbers 21:4-9****Psalms 102:1-3. 16-23****John 8:21-30****WEDNESDAY**  
**1 APRIL****Daniel 3:14-20. 24-25. 28****Canticle:****Bless the Lord****John 8:31-42****THURSDAY**  
**2 APRIL****Genesis 17:3-9****Psalms 105:4-9****John 8:51-end****FRIDAY**  
**3 APRIL****Jeremiah 20:10-13****Psalms 18:1-6****John 10:31-end****SATURDAY**  
**4 APRIL****Ezekiel 37:21-end****Canticle:****Jeremiah 31:10-13****or Psalms 121****John 11:45-end****REFLECTION**

As Passiontide begins, Monday's readings seem almost ironic – a story about an adulterous woman and a prostitute! But “*passion*” in this sense refers to suffering rather than erotic love. In the truest sense of the saying, love hurts.



Moving towards Holy Week and Easter, we recall the sacrificial, suffering love of Jesus. It wasn't, and isn't, easy to understand. On Tuesday Jesus expresses his frustration at people's lack of understanding. “*Why do I speak to you at all?*” he asks. The holier-than-thou attitude of his listeners, priding themselves on being sons of Abraham rather than children of God, influenced their treatment of an adulterous woman, although a man in the same position might well get off scot free.

In his reaction to the woman's imminent stoning, Jesus shows God's mercy and forgiveness and gives her a chance to begin again. That is the liberating truth that he mentions on Wednesday. But on Thursday and Friday people's persistent failure to understand almost leads to Jesus himself being stoned.

The week closes on another note of irony, when Caiaphas the high priest says that it is better for one man to die for the people than for the whole nation to be destroyed. It is, indeed, better – for all God's people, including sinful men and women, prostitutes and priests.

**PRAYER**

Merciful God, we thank you that your Son speaks to those who do not understand. His sacrifice helps us to begin to fathom the depth and breadth of your love. May this Passiontide deepen our understanding, and increase our love for our Saviour, in whose name we pray.

**THE BOOKS OF THE BIBLE****PART XXI – ECCLESIASTES – AN UNSETTLING BOOK**

*Richard Greatrex takes the baton to continue our book-by-book series about the Bible.*

Ecclesiastes is rather like a porcupine thrust into the canon of scripture – it doesn't quietly fit into any category. Its message is both muscular and sinuous, its text full of barbs that goad the reader into an ongoing, unsettling process of learning, and nobody seems comfortable in its presence.

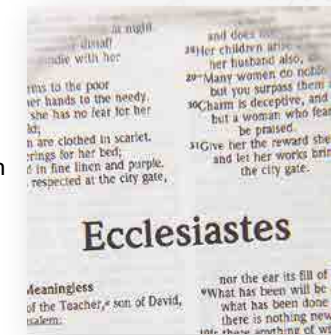
Ostensibly, Ecclesiastes lays out the life-knowledge of a post-exilic Jewish sage, known only as “*Qoheleth*”, the “*Teacher*”, and so it sits warily alongside Proverbs and Job as wisdom literature. Like them, it attempts to make sense of life based on observation and practical experience, focusing on human nature, offering a path for successful living.

Qoheleth's opening words are stark, startling and memorable – “*Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity*” – spiking our complacency at the outset, before robustly coaxing us through twelve short chapters of collected and at times contradictory sayings that further challenge our preconceptions of work, pleasure and meaningful existence.

With God, creator and judge, a silver thread fleetingly glimpsed through the dark weavings of human endeavour and written at a time before the possibility of life after death had been formed into Jewish doctrine, Ecclesiastes can be perceived as unremittingly bleak. Additionally, Qoheleth's repeated refrain, that all is vanity, vapour on the wind, that human work is toil, a wearying distraction diminishing life, that wisdom and folly are but a breath apart, for all die in the end, seems only to underscore the message of oppressive absurdity.

But Qoheleth is no one-dimensional preacher. He acknowledges that life is messy – the good get punished while the bad prosper, the fruits of our toil sometimes end up in the pockets of others and wisdom doesn't have all the answers. Yet he also chimes with contemporary concepts of mindfulness when he reminds us “*Better is a handful with quiet than two handfuls with toil*”, cautioning us to live in the moment and to appreciate the life, the loves, the creation that God has given us.

*Richard Greatrex is a parish priest, bookseller and author from Somerset.*

**LIVE**  
the **WORD**SUSTAINING YOU  
THROUGH THE WEEKEdited by  
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and  
Heather Smith

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Fifth week of Lent

Monday 30 March to  
Saturday 4 April  
2020

WEEK