

November 1983

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Recommended Citation

Cullen, John (1983) "Koheleth and Old Age," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 50 : No. 4 , Article 10.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lmq/vol50/iss4/10>

Koheleth and Old Age

Rev. John Cullen

Father Cullen served as a parish priest for 28 years, except for three and a half years when he was a chaplain during World War II and for two years when he studied for his master's degree in philocopy in Rome. From 1968 until his retirement in 1983, he was associate professor of systematic theology at St. Francis Seminary in Milwaukee. He notes that in the following article he has depended heavily upon Robert Gordis's Koheleth, The Man and His World (New York: Schocken Baaks, 1968).



In chapter 12 of the Book of Ecclesiastes, the Preacher (Koheleth) meditates on the coming of old age. He does not speak academically, but rather existentially as aging affects us here and now in the 20th century. The times have changed, but not the growing old. Surely there are problems peculiar to old age which must be studied economically, socially, medically, etc., but it must never be forgotten that we are dealing with old men and women who are persons — human beings, not categories. They are not problems to be solved by social behaviorists.

In our country — and it may be the same in others, I know not — there is a fear of growing old. We are so in love with youth, we sometimes seem to believe that we can stop the processes of growth and degeneration. We try to act young, to dress young, to look young, even at the cost of expensive surgery. We treat the aging process as though it were some sort of punishment for an unknown offense. We forget it is part of being human: we are born, we grow up, we grow old, and we die. Koheleth prefaces his discussion of old age with a few comments about the young:

Light is sweet! And it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun. However many years a man may live, let him, as he enjoys them all, remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that is to come is vanity.

Rejoice, O young man, while you are young

And let your heart be glad in the days of your youth.

Follow the ways of your heart, the vision of your eyes, yet understand that as regards all this, God will bring you to judgment, ward off grief from your heart and put away troubles from your presence, though the dawn of your youth is fleeting (Ecclesiastes 11:7-10).

This is good advice for the young, although I wonder how pertinent it is in a nuclear age. Koheleth reminds the young to remember their beginnings, even the very beginning of the world, to remember all the wonders and the beauty, all the good and great and wondrous days when, as D. Thomas Fein Hill says,

I ran my heedless ways

and nothing I cared at my sky blue trades that time allows.

Nature seems to blot out the sad days from our memories. But for all of us, young and old, as N. D. O'Donoghue writes, there are life's dark companions: pain and suffering, natural catastrophes and wars, depressions, and things over which we have no control. There are also life's evil companions: hatred, bigotry, prejudice, etc. These are of our own making, and we can do with them what we will.

Koheleth then begins to speak of the coming of the end: "Before the evil days come and the years approach of which you will say, 'I have no pleasure in them.' Before the sun is darkened, and the light and the moon and the stars, while the clouds return after the rain." Whether he is speaking only of the ending of a storm or the end of aging is for the pedant to decide; the poet sees in these dark and cold days the ending-of life even though it is not imminent.

Now there is a chill in the air, like a dark twilight in late November. The cold, dreary, drizzly days are upon us, along with the twilight sorrows. There is the smell of burning leaves in the air, a hint of snow in the wind, the dying of the day in the dying of the month, in the dying of the year. There is the bittersweet remembering of all that had been, the good and the bad, the sad songs and the merry ones, the dreams that never came to be, the vision that died aborning.

Once I could say, "I will start over again tomorrow." Once I could roll with the punches and come back stronger than ever. Once I started a new day with no thought of its ending, but now what is happening is often happening for the last time. No more regrouping and starting over, no new beginnings; all that remains are the golden days, a month, a year before my time will be no more. The future that to me seemed so endless now ends right around the corner. One more turning and I shall be on the way for home. One more night with no dawning. One more day with no setting sun.

It's sad and it's not sad. I always knew it would end. These days of ending need not be evil days. These aging years can, and do, bring

me much pleasure and joy. They have great meaning for me and for those who share my world. I have learned to live with great and small pains, to know I am not the center of the world and it does not revolve around me with my problems and difficulties. I wish the pain and problems would go away, but they will not, and in some strange sort of way I am content. I will not accept evil passively; I will not whine about how unfair life is, and has been to me. I shall fight against all evils in every way I can. I shall never go "gentle into that good night; as long as I have breath in me, I shall rage against the dying of the light." These were my days; I have done with them what I have done. No one can take from me what I am, what I have been. ". . . then (Abraham's) strength failed him, and he died, content in late old age, his tale of years complete, and he became part of his people" (Genesis 25:8, Knox translation).

At this point in chapter 12, verses 3-5, Koheleth begins to rattle off all the symptoms of the degeneration of old age in symbols and allusions so rich no one could ever exhaust them. Koheleth's ideas say they awake the pedant or the poet in us. I hope it is the poet, because poets stick to reality whereas pedants usually end in abstractions.

When the guardians of the house (the knees) tremble and the strong man (the arms and the thighs) are bent, and the grinders (the teeth) are idle because they are few, and they who look (the eyes) through the windows grow blind, when the doors (the ears) to the street are shut and the sound of the mills (the appetite or digestive system) is low, when one waits for the chirp of the bird (the elderly are easily awakened) but all the daughters of song (deafness of the aged or their voices become weak and they cannot sing) are suppressed, and one fears heights and perils in the street (aged are fearful of high places and often terrified by street traffic), when the almond tree blooms (white hair) and the locust grows sluggish (the bent figures of the aged and all burdens are difficult to carry) and the caper berry is without effect (the caper-berry was considered an aphrodisiac which no longer helps dwindling sexual powers) because we go to our lasting home (the grave) and the mourners go about in the street (the tragedy of human beings dying is just one more job for the professionals).

The general degeneration of old age has come upon us and all our vital powers are no longer what they were. So many things are changing, it is depressing to name them, or certainly to think about them. We change and our world changes. Fewer people listen to our stories, fewer remember what we remember, old friends are dying, there are more funerals to go to and more time to go to them. Where are all the people I grew with, all the people I laughed and loved and fought with? Where are the faces which brought joy to my heart and the voices that made my heart sing? So many are gone; so few still here.

The buildings which were landmarks of our youth are now parking lots or freeways. The streets are changed; the corner lots where once we played are filled with new buildings.

Where is the wife or husband of our youth? Where are the warmth and kindness, the gentleness, the forgiving and the infuriating, where

all the being together that made us whole? There are times when their absence becomes a presence and we are reminded daily that they walk no longer with us. There are times when the loneliness hurts so much that truly these are the days in which we find no pleasure.

Arms and legs, eyes and ears, sleeping and digestion are not what once they were. We remember the first day of our June vacation when school was over for the year, how we could sleep endlessly, dreamlessly. Now the whirring of hummingbirds' wings thunder us into wakefulness. We remember climbing great trees and bridges and houses. Now we tremble when we look down from heights we once would have leaped over. Now we know the fear of busy streets where once we ran with the fearless aliveness of youth.

Now it's almost over and the end is nearer than once it was. Now Koheleth writes of death:

Before the silver cord is snapped (the cord on which the lamp was suspended) and the golden bowl is broken (when the cord snaps, the lamp is shattered on the floor), and the pitcher is shattered at the spring (when the pulley rope breaks and the pitcher falls into the well) and the broken pulley falls into the well, and the dust returns to the earth as it once was buried in the ground) and the breath returns to God who gave it. Vanity of vanities, all things are vanity (Ecclesiastes 12:6-8).

In the beginning Koheleth reminds us to remember our Creator when life came out of the water and light out of the darkness. Now at the end darkness descends upon our lives when the lamp is broken, and the water that gave us life can no longer reach us because the pitcher is broken at the well. Koheleth, however, was wrong. Life was never vanity, never emptiness. All my days were full of choices, and whatever anyone thinks of me and my days, they were my choices and my days. They were never empty. Life was always good but it was too short. We shall live till we die. What Tennyson said of Ulysses can be said of us:

Old age hath yet his honour and his toil
Death closes all: but something ere the end,
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die.
It may be that the gulfs will wash us down;
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.
Though much is taken, much abides; and though
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.