

Ecclesiastes 4:1-12

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[0 : 00] In 1624 John Donne wrote Meditation number 17 which most of you will probably know as his famous poem No man is an island.

! No man is an island entire of itself. Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manner of thy friends or of thine own were. Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee.

No man is an island, he says. I am part of mankind. We were made for community. We were made as individuals to be part of a whole, hardwired for community.

We know that, don't we? Loneliness is not a good thing. But the preacher, the writer of Ecclesiastes asks us, do we really believe that?

Does this world behave like it believes that? We met the preacher, the writer of Ecclesiastes a few weeks ago. He's the godly realist.

[1 : 40] He warns us about the danger of trying to break away from the limits that God has placed on us in this life under the sun. Creaturally limits.

He warns us of treating life as if it is a project for gain, rather than a gift from God. And in this section in Ecclesiastes chapter 4, he warns us of trying to pull away from others.

Of the temptation of pulling away from the whole. Of being an individualist. Of going it alone. Of saying in life, me first.

In verse 9 he says, two are better than one. Deep down though, our problem is treating life as if we are on a kind of private TV show where we are the star.

Guests come and go maybe, but I am the regular. And it comes down to me and to me alone. Saying of my life, me, not us.

[2 : 55] Me first. So in this passage the preacher wants us to warn us of the folly of going it alone in life. When God has made us for community.

For each other. He says three things to us. First of all he says, look at the ugliness of going it alone. Look at the ugliness of going it alone.

If you just drop your eye down to verse 1 to 3 there. The preacher starts off here, doesn't he, by becoming a news correspondent.

He goes out into the world and he watches the world. He sees what goes on in the world and he journals it down.

And there's his headline in verse 1 at the top there. Again I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. He sees a world where people are living for me, not for us.

[4 : 01] People treading on other people to break away from the whole and to rise up above everybody else. Of oppression with no one to comfort those who are being oppressed.

And as he looks out over the world it's just story after story after story. Of oppression. Of child abuse.

And of murder. And of human trafficking. And of rich tyrants. And warlords. And refugees. And unfair trade.

And abusive fathers. And prostitution. And poverty. And unfair society. A world that we see so clearly today. And he sees so many sickening things in the world.

Do you remember the story of baby P. Peter Connolly. A 17th month old baby who was killed by his parents after abuse.

[5 : 12] My little boy is 24 months this week. And that story just sickens me to the stomach. He was beaten violently by his parents.

And he died from his injuries. Because at the heart of it they were saying in their lives. Me. Not us.

See the ugliness. Apparently they pulled out his fingernails. They knocked his teeth out. They broke his back.

It's an extreme case isn't it. But this is where it goes. Where it leads. This is what living for me looks like.

In full force. This is a showcase of where it goes. Left unrestrained. When it's me. Not us. And he is crushed by this vision.

[6 : 15] In verse 2 to 3. I thought the dead who are already dead. More fortunate than the living who are still alive. He says I looked at the world.

And I thought you know. It would be better not to be born. Even. How can a man of God say that? Well remember he is a realist.

He doesn't just give us the trite answers. He doesn't whitewash over the world as it is. He may say to us. Well do you think I'm being over the top here?

Well just look at the world as I have seen it. Try and watch the world as I have watched it. Watch children in need without the funny bits.

Watch comic relief without the comic relief. He makes us watch everything. He gives us the detail doesn't he?

[7 : 12] Of the tears of the oppressed. Feel the injustice. Feel the ugliness of selfishness and where it leads. This is the ugliness of me, me, me.

Not us. Jesus Christ summarised the law of God. And he said the Lord our God the Lord is one.

And you shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength.

And you shall love your neighbour as yourself. God's law underpins all of life. And when we break it, the world becomes an ugly place.

When I don't love my neighbour as I love myself. And life is about me, not about us. As you listen to the preacher, maybe you're thinking, this is all a bit extreme.

This is not who I am. Just think for a moment. Which person have you thought most about since we last met? Who have you filtered everything that you've seen or heard in the last week for?

[8 : 29] As you sit here right now, isn't there one person in the room who you see everything through and for? Who you process everything for?

The one person that you spend most of the time thinking about and wanting to keep happy? One person, me.

As we've gone through Ecclesiastes, hasn't that been the way that we've all thought? My repetitious life. My fleeting pleasures.

My season of life. Last week if you were here. We filter everything in life through and for ourselves. That is the central process of all that we do, isn't it, naturally?

Now can I say that is good on one level. As I listen to God and apply his word, I must apply it to myself, mustn't I? No one else can believe for me.

[9 : 31] No one else can come to God with my sins and my guilt and repent on my behalf, can they? I must do that myself. One theologian said that if I deal with the gospel at all, I must deal with it as if there are no other people in the world.

Martin Luther said that the only two things a man must do alone are his believing and his dying. But at heart, if we're honest, we know that we are like this.

Our hearts run on me fuel. We are more often than not excited by me things rather than us things.

We don't just watch the oppression through a window. We are little oppressors ourselves. We enjoy it.

Don't we, if we're honest, when we feel better than others? There is the thin end of the wedge. We are part of what makes this world ugly.

[10 : 38] Going it alone is ugly, he says. Second of all, though, he says that going it alone is self-destructive. It's self-destructive.

The problem with living the kind of private TV show, star show life is that it oppresses others, it's ugly. But he goes on to show that if you hate your neighbour, you are also hating yourself, ironically. Ironically, the oppressors are the ones destroying themselves. Just look at verse 4 and 5. I saw that all the toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbour.

This also is vanity and a striving after wind. The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh. When the engine of life is me, not us, when the focus is me, all that I do inevitably will destroy me.

I will be driven by jealousy and the need to better others, to compare myself with others, to rise above them.

[11 : 53] And all of my work and my skill will only come from that desire to break away from community, to stand out and to rule the world in my own little way, to live on an island.

And we all do it, don't we? We all have that impish, perverse thing in us that rejoices at others' misfortune.

We enjoy sympathising with others in their misfortune. We can put our arm around them because there is something in us that feels better about ourselves in comparison.

We're driven by envy and not by genuine love. Someone said, a true friend is someone who weeps when you weep, but who rejoices when you rejoice.

We're more sympathetic with those who weep than we are rejoicing with friends who rejoice, aren't we?

[12 : 59] We don't get as excited about people's success and happiness as we do about their misery. Because we love to be in a pecking order.

We love to see others lower than ourselves. It's why we, people watch Jerry Springer, isn't it? And Jeremy Kyle, to get that feeling, myself rising up.

And that will either lead, he says, to manic busyness, working and toiling in envy, or to bone idleness, folding his hands, the fool.

Going it alone will either burn you out or it will eat you up. Verse 5 is weird, isn't it? If you look at that. The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh.

Cut off from the community. It's a very strong image, isn't it? A fool chews his own fingers off. A fool eats his own flesh.

[14 : 00] We often hear about those who suffer at the hands of oppressors. But here the preacher shows us the suffering of the oppressors themselves. An envy that eats away at life.

An attitude of comparison eats away at everything in life. The Proverbs say that whoever isolates himself seeks his own destruction. He breaks out against all sound judgment.

Going it alone is self-destructive. Some people can't afford community. They can't afford to invest in relationships of any kind because they can't afford the time.

They can't afford the money they will lose. or they can't afford to work less. But the preacher says that is an unhappy business. You'd be like the guy in verse 7 and 8 there who has no relationships but has many riches.

He could buy as someone puts it everyone a meal in the restaurant but no one wants to sit with him. And he doesn't want anyone to sit with him either. He hasn't stopped to ask what am I doing all of this for?

[15 : 22] Virginia Woolf said no pleasure has any relish unless we share it. The ugliness of it the self-destructiveness of it.

And thirdly and lastly community is a mess worth making. Community is a mess worth making. And looking at verse 9 to the end here the truth of this passage is that living for us and not for me is actually always going to be better for me in the end.

And he gives us some scenarios to prove the point doesn't he? Living in community is better. Verse 9 work is better in community. You can get more done.

You can get more fruit for your toil more work with others. Hard times are better in community. You can lift one another up. You can encourage one another.

You're safer in battle in war with someone else fighting next to you. You can prevail over the man who attacks you. When I start thinking us more than me when I start living for us we find a contentment that we cannot find on our island on our own.

[16 : 47] And that's his point in verse 6. Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after a wind. He says there is a choice here isn't there?

He makes a comparison. He says you can either be driven by envy living the me first life or you can be driven by something else driven by community by others but some choose money over people some choose isolation over community some are too busy to invest in people and he says you will be rich in that case you'll have your hands full but you will have your hands full in life life will be a constant toil and it will eat you up inside we may only get one handful he says there rather than two of riches but believe me he says community is better the one handful that we have will be a handful of quietness when we say it is okay that my neighbour has more than me it is okay that someone

else is higher up than me that they are more fortunate than me that they are enjoying things that I am not and with that comes a quietness comes an enjoyment of what we do have in thinking us rather than me contentment as we go to bed at night as we put our heads on the pillow when we are worrying not about me but about others and how they're doing living in community can bring a peace that I would never have had even if I was the ruler of the world God's design is this that we are individuals we're not to become kind of homogenous thing but not to be individualistic he made us for community now we know that don't we we know what the preacher is saying here is true and we try and find community social media clubs and societies and organisations we join a music group or a book club we join a charity group we have a street party we already know the wisdom of this we try and do community in our own way but often as soon as we get into a group we find that those communities are still run by egos we find village politics that wherever people get together don't we and we find the same hurts in those groups that we felt when we were on our own but in the rest of the

Bible our need for community is only satisfied in the one community that God has created the one community where he has brought his people together some of you might be listening to this and thinking you just don't know how I've been hurt by others you don't know how badly I've been burnt by other people and I don't want to go through that again but there is one community on earth only one community where hurting people and where sinners are brought together by something much greater than themselves where done rightly egos those are left at the door Paul the apostle says to a church that he writes to in Philippi he says that we are all partakers together of grace we are brought together by a mutual undeserving of being together by an understanding that none of us deserve to be in

God's church we're all sinners we're all broken people we're all people who tend at heart to think me rather than us but God has made his church one body joined in Christ joined with a bond closer than a family member the preacher is not saying that church will be a bed of roses and community is perfect under the sun but he's seen the alternative hasn't he the church of Jesus Christ is the one community that one day will be without sin and without ego where everyone thinks and is learning to think you first us so he says to us today don't destroy yourself come to this oasis in this ugly world of me me me start thinking us not me start living for us and not me come to the church come to

[22 : 41] Christ because living for us and not for me is always going to be better for me in the end let's pray together