

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: Notes for 22nd April to 6th May

Note no meeting on Easter Monday

These Ecclesiasticus readings continue to challenge the reader to ask two questions: 1) Is the writer giving generally good advice (a sensible starting point for making your own decisions)? 2) Is the advice so good, that it must always be strictly followed? As a civil servant, I was advised: Ministers' decisions are final. This is generally good advice, based on Ministers being elected and me not being elected. But a Ministerial decision could be illegal, immoral, or disastrous.....

Monday 22 April: Ecclesiasticus 10.4 – 11.6: Host Toyin, Lead Sophie: Life under divine providence. Fear of (respect for) the Lord. Being yourself and not pretending. The assertion that God appoints rulers was made in the context of unelected rulers, who were sometimes there by “popular” acclaim, but more often by inheritance, military victory, factional choice, or even murder. The secular historian would argue that the most any ruler could legitimately claim was that God hadn't stopped him (usually) becoming and staying king. 10,8 about empire says it all! Do you sing comfortably “Wider still and wider may your bounds be set; God who made you mightier yet”? (It's a great tune!) Think Vladimir Putin.

Verse 10.10 is punchy. There are historical examples of famous people regularly reminding themselves of their mortality – John Donne had a coffin in his bedroom. Pride is “Hubris”, and not self-respect – sometimes difficult not to confuse pride and self respect (proper pride). Not uncommon to see bodies lying around in those days.

19-25 are powerful in levelling up (or down). A bit of status, a great appearance, are fine – but not what really matters. Kate Middleton has status and looks, but probably we most admire the mother wrestling with cancer. Being yourself rather than pretending is good advice; but maybe the emphasis should be on being your best – rather than “I'm a self-centred crusty anti-social loner; so just get used to me!”

Monday 29 April: Ecclesiasticus 11.7- 12.7: Host Toyin, Lead Brian: Use your ears (before you open your mouth. Attitudes to work and prosperity. Invitations and gifts. 11.7 and 11.8 make you think: yes, if only.... Though maybe interrupting can be OK? (The politician ignoring the question and delivering the speech might benefit from the interviewer butting in?) You may like the levelling up agenda. The emphasis here is on community behaviour more than individual behaviour, though both are matter. There are challenges where the levelling up agenda replaces the “best” person with the “right” person: “We really wanted someone with a history degree to teach history, but you are disabled and transgender and mixed race, so you get the job”? I like 11.23: nobody should feel useless. Recognise the Jesus parable of the man with the barns?

The last section seems to be saying “only do good things to good people” – only help the deserving poor! Picture the Good Samaritan standing beside the hit and run victim, and saying “Before I get the bandages out, I want to ask you a few questions about your life style choices over the past 40 years.” Rehabilitation of addicts or offenders would become rather tricky! “Never help a sinner” would seem to mean never help anyone.....and that none of us would get any help! I seem to recall “Jesus died for us while we were still sinners”.

Monday 6 May: Ecclesiasticus 12.8 – 13.1: Host Toyin, Lead Evan. Friends and enemies. Maybe read this with “A friend in need is a friend indeed” in mind. Mirrors in those days were metal rather than glass, and needed frequent polishing. How do we define friends and friendship? Far weather friends? Trust is often a sort of conditional thing: you might trust somebody’s motives, but question their competence – the 14 year old baby sitter; the L driver offering a lift; the scout with a first aid badge volunteering to re-set your arm. (In a London Park, a small scout pushed aside a surgeon who was going to help someone who had fallen and broken their arm!) My favourite trust story has always been the psychiatrist in a secure hospital who (briefly) left his two children in a room with a [rehabilitated?] sex offender. He judged the man fit for conditional discharge, but wanted to make a safe test. He came back to find the children perfectly safe, and the patient weeping at the trust.