

'The Lord by **wisdom** founded the earth'

Sermon message by the Rev Derek Lightbourne St James October 12 2014

Keynote Bible Reading: Proverbs 3.1 – 19

Some years ago I was challenged by a member of the church from another denomination and who had come to our attend our worship. 'You Anglicans,' she said, 'don't teach about wisdom from the Bible. Having not previously that I could recall preached a sermon on that theme I was stung by the comment, and immediately sought to rectify it after more study. Indeed there's some truth in the observation even in these days. It was thus by the Lectionary selection of Proverbs Chapter 3 that prompts tonight's message. Hopefully you go away that much more informed on actually what is recognised by scholars as a whole body of 'Wisdom literature' in Scripture, and a number of references in the New Testament. Jesus in his parables referred to the wise and the foolish. St Paul asked of the Corinthian Christians, 'Where is the one who is wise? May I suggest wisdom has a relevance today in that I come across folk who enjoy reading wisdom literature from other faith traditions, for example I'm sure a number of you read Kahlil Gibran's 'The Prophet' when it was printed. Yet it is likely many remain ignorant of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Historically it is known the Greeks of old focussed on wisdom. Indeed the word philosophy is from *philo*-a form of love and *sophia*. In the Old Testament the 3 main books on wisdom are Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job. There's some excerpts also in the Psalms and the 'Song of Songs' could be in this category. Some of the books of the Apocrypha are also of this theme. As for people in that era known to be wise, Solomon was certainly recognised for his 'Wisdom of Solomon.'

To begin at the beginning so to speak and tonight's theme sentence and title of the sermon is '**the Lord by wisdom created the earth.**' That would suggest firstly it is an aspect of the Divine nature, and all that came from it is of wisdom. From the verses: 'The Lord by wisdom founded the earth, by understanding he created the heavens; by his knowledge the deeps broke forth, and the clouds drop down the dew. (Prov 3.19 – 20) Another is: 'The Lord created wisdom at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago. Ages ago I was set up, at the first before the beginning of the earth.' Of the awesomeness of this, the writer counsels: 'Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not rely on your own insight, in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.' If we can 'earth' that, it is to be aware of God in all situations, and to seek to follow the ways of God. Perhaps one of the most well-known phrases is 'the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.' (Prov 1.7)

I consider that it is somewhat difficult in that 'fear' has associations of punishment, and of old was probably regarded in that respect. An alternative rendering is of *having reverence* for the Holy One. This is at the heart of wisdom. We do well to take this into account and it distresses me when I hear God's name taken in vain. It may be a small item but I note now in some writing 'God' is rendered in lower case, a seeming lessening of respect.

A second aspect of this wisdom of the nature of God is that it is referred to in the *feminine*: 'Her ways are ways of pleasantness and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her (Prov 3.17) Where does this feminine come from? That is not really known. Some ascribe it to ancient goddesses of earlier cultures. Others ascribe it to the highly valued intuition of wife, mother, wise woman, whilst other scholars regard it as personification way of describing, as one also refers to 'mother nature.' Or it could have to do with 'birthing', the activity of the female – the birthing of creation. Whatever it may be it is interesting that this feminine is given recognition in a strongly patristic male dominated society of the Hebrew nation of the 'God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.'

A third factor in the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) is of the many short crisp two line sentences that refer to some *aspect of human experience and relationships*. They are often quite 'secular' and yet there's wisdom with a view to warning against unsavoury human conduct. For example one of many: 'a soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.' (Prov.15.1). There's also a motif of the proverbs writers that religious faith is the necessary foundation of the good life: 'Do not be wise in your own eyes, fear the Lord and turn away from evil.'

We move on – to reference in the *New Testament*. As earlier mentioned Jesus in his teaching referred to 'the wise man who built his house on the rock, and other parables of wisdom. He amplifies the Hebrew wisdom teaching deriving from the biblical literature earlier mentioned. These references are much more familiar to us. Indeed the 'Sermon on the Mount sayings of Matthew 5 – 7 could be referred to as wisdom.

The Letter of James has a lovely section on wisdom – may I read verses from Chapter 3: 'Who is wise among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. The wisdom from above (thus suggesting the source in God) is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.' This summary bears some similarity to the wisdom of the Hebrew literature. Both are for the good ethics of how people are to live. They describe a lifestyle that could be applied for good human living and relationships.

There's other New Testament mentions and in particular returning to St Paul's question, 'where is the one who is wise? When we consider what St Paul goes on to write it is as though it is 'counter-culture' to many of the practices of the world. His insight, surely God-given describes a uniqueness of the nature of wisdom and contrasts it with how the world regards it. Paul uses the word wisdom 20 times in the chapter and essentially it is round the significance of the death of Jesus on a cross. 'Christ crucified' he writes 'is a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.' Paul says that what looked like God's weakness in allowing this is in fact testimony to '*Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.*' Paul is in fact expounding on the central truth of the Christian faith – the cross of Christ. What looks like weakness is in fact strength. Through Christ's death and rising again shows great power – the power of love over hatred, the

power of forgiveness over vengeance, the power of life over death, the power of God to salvation – being saved to all who believe. It is poetically described in awesome words of the hymn: ‘When I survey the wondrous cross on which the prince of glory died....’ And we are left in awe of what Jesus did for us through this. Our response in wisdom is to be in awe of this – as it was for us and invites us to sing: Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were an offering far too small; love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.’

In summary then, a biblical understanding of wisdom has first to do with the nature of God being of wisdom, and who was present in creation. Humans grasp something of this wisdom for human relationships and their relationship with God. Then the climax indeed of the purpose of God in Christ to enable us in Jesus’ death on a cross to be in a relationship with him. And I sum it up in the familiar words of John 3.16: God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.’