

## MORE UNCOMMON WISDOM

Readings: Proverbs 31:10-31; Psalm 1; James 3: 1-12; Mark 8: 27-38

This week we continue with the theme of Wisdom, as we come to the end of our lectionary readings from Proverbs.

**In Biblical Scholarship, the genre of 'Wisdom Literature'** is usually connected with the Books of Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon.

Interesting to note that these are **generalized books about Wisdom** that are not sharply focused on God, nor are these Books focused on the history of Israel, like other Books in the Hebrew Scriptures (Our Old Testament). They are generalized books about Wisdom.

The Wisdom Literature addresses the ultimate questions of life like, 'Why do good people suffer' (Job), or 'How to come to terms with old age and death' (Ecclesiastes), or 'How do we deal with wild human emotions and erotic love (Song of Solomon).

That is how the original Jewish readers would have understood these Books. We Christians, have 'Christianized' the Books and interpreted them in a Christian light. E.g. Song of Solomon is seen as being about Christ's relationship to the church.

**Some of the Psalms could be included in the body of Wisdom Literature. Our Psalm for today, Psalm 1** which we used in our Call to Worship, is an example of a Wisdom Psalm.

It is a description of 'who will be blessed' and what they need to do to become 'blessed'. It also provides a description of what will become of the unwise.

They (the wise) are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.

The wicked (or unwise) are not so prosperous but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore, the wicked will not stand in the judgment nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous, for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

**In the New Testament all of Jesus' Parables would come under the broad heading of 'Wisdom Literature'.**

Let's look at our first reading which comes from the last chapter of Proverbs. Chapter 31.

Men will be interested to note that most of the Book of Proverbs is addressed to men. Particularly young men.

Some scholars say (very plausibly) that Proverbs was originally an Instruction Book, for young men serving as courtiers in the king's court.

If you followed the wisdom of the Book of Proverbs your career would prosper, and you would be able to negotiate the machinations of political life in the king's court. Follow Wisdom, she will take care of you. Don't follow her and you could end up dead or banished from the king's court.

In the earlier chapters of Proverbs, Wisdom is personified as a woman – in Hebrew her name is 'Chokma'. In Greek her name is 'Sophia'.

If we go further back into the Creation Stories, Wisdom is seen as God's co-creator, or God's partner in the act of creation. Together, God and Wisdom created the world from nothing.

In the Book of Proverbs, Wisdom is present in the most obvious places, like the busy marketplace and in the street, but to hear her voice, you must listen carefully. The more you listen, and look for her, the more you will find her.

'That is a rule of a successful life' the book of Proverbs is saying. 'Listen and look diligently for Lady Wisdom - and you will find her'.

When you have found her, you will prosper - or 'flourish' might be a better word, as you may not necessarily prosper financially, but you will flourish as a person.

Sometimes we can only see Wisdom through the rear-vision mirror of our lives. As we look back over our lives, we can see how far we have come, and we can see where we have been blessed.

It could have been in the choices we have made, or in the goodness of life itself. In the favourable twists and turns of life, we see wisdom.

I never ever dreamed that I would one day be a Chaplain in the Army, or in the Royal NZ Navy. I was ordained to parish ministry, in a small country town, but through a fortuitous chain of events, I ended up in the Military Chaplaincy for 17 years. And I loved it.

I never dreamed that I would ever end up in a Church like St Columba's, in a place like Havelock North. What a lovely place to be.

There was a kind of Wisdom guiding my footsteps. But I still had to make the wise choices. I was not a passive participant in my own destiny.

You may be able to think of events in your life that reflect a wisdom that was not obvious at the time. You made the right decision about something important – Wisdom was on your side, or you were on the side of Wisdom.

In the last chapter of proverbs, we see a profile of Lady Wisdom:

She works with willing hands (verse 13), rises while it is still night and provides food for us (verse 15), opens her hand to the poor (verse 20), opens her mouth with wisdom, the teaching of kindness is on her tongue (verse 26). Many uncommon character traits are laudable, but wisdom surpasses them all.

Sometimes the last Chapter of Proverbs is taken to be the description of the perfect wife. It's a passage often used at Mother's Day celebrations, or at the significant birthday of a family matriarch. Kath Craig's family used it at her funeral to honour her life as the family matriarch and mother.

It is a passage that perfectly describes the perfect wife, but in Proverbs I think it is meant to be more than that.

The woman in Proverbs 31 is more than an appendage to her husband's life. She actually 'enables' him to become all that he can be. He sits among the elders, and at the city gate, only because she enables him to do so.

Proverbs 31 is also about the spiritual, intellectual and material leadership that women offer to the world – especially in patriarchal societies.

On Friday 19 September many women and men in Aotearoa NZ celebrated the anniversary of the women's right to vote in 1893. Our last two members of parliament have been women. Anna Lorcke and now Catherine Wedd. We have a woman mayor in Sandra Hazelhurst.

There are probably more women in public office than ever before.

It still shocks me and others to hear that even today, in the private sector, women lag men in the three areas of power, pay and prestige.

You just wonder how that can happen where women are doing the same jobs as men?

I have been fortunate enough to work in occupations where women earned the same pay as men, for equal work. That is, in the NZ Police, the Armed Forces and in the Church Ministry. I don't think we could justify any difference in pay, power and prestige – the so-called 'scarce resources'.

We still have a long way to go, but wisdom says that we should keep going. Stay on the side of justice and fairness.

**In our second reading from the Letter of James, we learn that there are two kinds of wisdom:** The earthly, unspiritual, devilish kind (vs14-16) that leads to violence, disorder and all kinds of chaos. And there is the heavenly Wisdom from above that 'is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.'

<sup>18</sup>And a harvest of righteousness, that is sown in peace for those who make peace.

Wisdom is like the Spirit - unseen and yet obvious. Courage is Wisdom applied.

It takes courage to be counter cultural. To be peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, and without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy - when the world says that it's okay to be the opposite of those things. (It's okay to be nasty, bullying, showing no mercy, and being partial towards the people you dislike.)

Wisdom is counter cultural – but it leads to life as it was meant to be.

**Finally, in our gospel reading from Mark 9:30-37 is another Story about the ‘upside-down’ wisdom of Jesus.**

When the disciples were found arguing over who would be the greatest in the new kingdom, he said the familiar verse: The greatest among you must be the servant of all. Jesus took a child, placed the child among them and said, ‘you must become like this child’.

<sup>37</sup>‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.’

In the ‘upside down’ wisdom of God, instead of snatching at power, Jesus will go to his death on a cross, as a testimony to the love of God for all people - you and I included.

**PRAYER FOR WISDOM**

Lord, decisions shape our lives. We seek Your wisdom in making choices that honour You and bring life and health to our very being. Guide us as we consider all aspects and consequences of our deciding. Grant us the clarity to see the best path and the courage to follow it. May Your wisdom be our guide in every decision we face. In Your name, we pray, **Amen.**