

BCP EVENING PRAYER - 12 October 2008

(Sermon by Lynda Taylor)

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable now and always in your sight, O Lord our God and our Redeemer.

I don't know if you tried to drive through Cambridge last weekend, but if you did, you might have noticed an even greater level of congestion than usual. It was the weekend when yet another generation of students was arriving at Cambridge University – not to mention those returning for their second or third years. As Nigel and I tried to drive out of Cambridge at lunchtime last Saturday, on the way to our daughter Ellie's wedding in Royston at 2 pm, we found our respective bridal cars tangled up in heavy traffic; many vehicles were being driven by confused parents, struggling to navigate Cambridge's 1-way system, or parked inconveniently in order to unload everything their teenage child had brought with them, including the kitchen sink. The days of the single trunk despatched by British Rail are long gone! Happily the bridal car at the church door in Royston only a few minutes' late, at which point I gather her husband-to-be, who was waiting nervously at the altar, breathed a sigh of relief.

Cambridge University has been celebrating its 800th anniversary and down the centuries, young people, and now older folk too, have come here to continue their learning, to gain knowledge, to acquire understanding and wisdom, not just of their particular subject area but of wider life issues too. Some say Cambridge attracts the crème de la crème – or the cream of the cream, though I've heard sceptics joke that much of this cream can be 'clotted' at times.

Our readings this evening come from the Book of Proverbs (Proverbs 3:1-18) and from John's letter to the early Christian church (1 John 3:1-15). Proverbs mentions 'wisdom' over 40 times in its 31 chapters, suggesting that the search for true wisdom – a wisdom that is inspired by and focused towards God rather than humanly oriented - is a high priority for God's people. Proverbs, and also John's letter in his way, offer us a different perspective on understanding and wisdom from the one which tends to prevail in our culture today. We often think of wisdom as deriving from the gathering of information, from skills training, from qualifications and from personal experience.

But I'd like to share 3 thoughts about the nature of true wisdom that strike me from these 2 passages – thoughts which I believe have relevance for us as individuals and as a church family here at St Andrew's.

▪ **Wisdom contextualised in our relationships – with God and with others**

The first thing that struck me is that true wisdom is actually to be found within the context of human relationships, relationships with others and with God. The Proverbs passage begins *My son, do not forget my teaching but keep my commands in your heart...* the context is that of family. We learn from the wisdom of one another, from those close to us and who have gone before us in the journey of life. Later, the writer mentions the centrality of the parent/child relationship, the key role played by a parent in nurturing and guiding a child in how to live, and he describes our

relationship with God in a similar way. John's letter echoes this powerful relational aspect. So many times in his letters to the young and developing 1st century Christian church, John, by now an aged apostle, speaks in affectionate terms calling them *my dear children*. Like a wise and loving parent, he encourages them to be confident and faithful amid the confusion of the age, a world where it was so easy to be tempted into following other paths, not unlike our world in some ways. He reminds them of their roots in God's family as children of God, of their genetic inheritance as offspring born of God's Spirit. So true wisdom is to be found through our relationships with God and with one another. Here at St Andrew's, we might ask ourselves whether the quality of our relationships with one another and with God is such that we are encouraged to grow in faith and wisdom? Do we seek out and benefit from those among us who are older and maturer in the faith, those who can testify to God's leading and faithfulness in their lives? Do we live in the certainty of our genetic inheritance, or do we lack confidence about our origins as God's children. How might we deepen relationships with God and one another? Our autumn teaching programme, our Alpha course, and our Parish weekend next March are all rich opportunities to grow in relationship with God and one another.

▪ **Wisdom as the grounds for human security and well-being**

A second theme that struck me in our Proverbs reading is that true wisdom offers us the only sure foundation for our personal security and sense of well-being in life. Both the Psalms and Proverbs speak of the fear of the Lord as the beginning of wisdom. In this evening's reading the writer in Proverbs unpacks for us this ancient term 'the fear of the Lord'; he speaks of recognising and acknowledging God's claims on our life, of placing our trust and faith in him, and of walking in his ways. And he does more - he is bold enough to suggest that doing all of this has a direct correlation with various aspects of our human existence: our life expectancy; our material well-being; our personal and public reputation; our state of health; our financial security. These are powerful claims in our modern age, an age of rationalism and unbelief; of course, we also know that it's not as simple as that, and the writer of Proverbs wisely reminds us that the righteous do face times of testing and affliction, and the Bible includes the Book of Job to underline that truth. And yet, positive claims about the benefits of true wisdom should not be dismissed lightly. There is a growing body of scientific research pointing to the physical, mental and emotional health benefits experienced by those with faith in God. Perhaps these words are especially poignant and timely just now as the entire world grapples with financial crises. There is surely a tragic irony in the fact that while America faces financial meltdown, every dollar bill still carries the words 'In God We Trust'. This week sees the celebration of the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles or Sukkot. I'm moved by the thought of some of my Jewish friends who will build for themselves a small shelter in the garden or on the verandah, a physical as well as spiritual reminder of God's faithful provision for his people during their wilderness travels, and a reminder that they are still called to trust and celebrate his continuing provision today. Where are we tempted to place our trust - in our talents? in our property? in our pensions? While these things are all good, they cannot be where our ultimate security lies. Is God calling us to experience a greater dependence on him, along with the sense of peace this brings?

- **Wisdom as the source and basis for God's creative activity in the world**

A third theme that struck me is that true wisdom is the foundation for God's creative activity in the world. If we had read a little further in Proverbs, we'd have heard that divine wisdom guided the creation of the universe. That divine wisdom still permeates the whole creation. To live by wisdom is to follow the example of God himself, living in peace and harmony with the created order, experiencing wholeness, 'shalom'. We have sadly neglected such wisdom in recent decades, leading to the current environmental chaos we see and experience around us. The writer of Proverbs alludes to the state of affairs existing in the Garden of Eden at the dawn of creation – a time when the relationship between all things was in harmonious balance. He echoes the image of the 'tree of life', an image that is repeated 4 times in Proverbs. It reminds us of the account in Genesis 2 where 'the tree of life' intended as a source of blessing to all stood alongside 'the tree of the knowledge of good and evil'. And of course it was the fruit of that second tree that proved so seductive to Adam and Eve, leading to the fracture of relationships with God and with one another.

Our world today encourages us to believe that information is key and knowledge is power; but what we lack most and need more than anything in our human relationships and activities, is wisdom and the love in action which it generates. John links together God's creative nature and the love he lavishes on his creation, including ourselves as his children. And he also links the search after wisdom, with the commitment to doing what is right and acting in love. John does not suggest that we never make mistakes in this; it is not that we never sin, or fall short of God's standards, but he stresses that the life of God's children should be characterised by doing what is right and loving, rather than according to the world's standards. So what do others see when they look at us – as individuals or as a church family? In our homes and workplaces, in our weekly worship and our weekday service in the community, do they see a measure of wisdom and love in action as opposed to just pious words or a reflection of the world's values? Do we embrace and lay hold of the 'tree of life', the cross of Jesus, so that we in turn may be a tree of life to others, offering fruit for nourishment and leaves of healing?

So the writer of Proverbs challenges our view of what constitutes true wisdom – reminding us it is far more to do with the 'heart knowledge' that comes through faith in God, than it is to do with the 'head knowledge' that is prized in a city like Cambridge or in the wider world. And John's letter reassures us that even if our faith is rejected as foolish by those who are wise in human terms, our status and calling as God's beloved children remains unshakeable and eternal. And we can echo Paul's prayer for the Christians at the church in Ephesus [Ephesians 3:16-19]:

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen us with power through his Spirit in our inmost being, so that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith. And I pray that we, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that we may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Amen.