

**St John's and St Stephen's Church, Sunday, 16<sup>th</sup> September 2009, Proverbs 1:20-33**

*'Wisdom says...give heed to my reproof'*

Today, in St John's at least, marks the first Sunday in the Church's new season of 'Creation'. This season is being observed in many churches in addition to the seasons we are used to – Advent, Christmas, Epiphany and so on. It punctuates the otherwise long season of 'ordinary time', or Trinity and is meant to bring a special focus on the created order. You might expect that we would start therefore with something from Genesis but unfortunately the lectionary hasn't caught up yet so we have readings from Proverbs and Mark. And the Proverbs reading leads me to explore creation theology from the aspect of *wisdom*. Those of you with very long memories will remember that I preached on wisdom a month ago and that last year I led a Sacred Space on wisdom from the book of Ecclesiastes. So here we go again!

This morning I would like to put some jigsaw pieces together. Here are the pieces: Creation, Jesus, Wisdom and Climate Change. I have a strong feeling that we really *need* to put these bits together because climate change is such a huge problem. Some of us who grew up with our Christian thinking very focused on Jesus and the cross have trouble seeing environmental issues as anything to do with our faith. In fact, some Christians have a sense that 'it'll all pan out somehow' and all we really need to do is preach salvation by faith in Christ. Don't let me stop anyone from preaching salvation by faith in Christ, please, ever. But what I want to say is: there's a bigger picture and we, as Christians, have some good news.

Let's look first at some very profound creation theology. I am going to read a passage from Proverbs. It's a beautiful passage and I would like you to open your ears and hearts and allow the poetry and power of this passage to grip you, as it is meant to. There are truths so profound that *only* poetry or song can convey the power of them. It is Proverbs 8:22-31, reading from the NRSV, and the subject is wisdom:

*'The Lord created me 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. When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water. Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills I was brought forth – when he had not yet made earth and fields, or the world's first bits of soil. When he established the heavens, I was there, when he drew a circle on the face of the deep, when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep, when he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master worker, and I was daily his delight, rejoicing in him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.'*

There are two points to be made from this amazing passage. The first is that the writer saw wisdom as the *first thing* that God created. This is to underline the importance of getting hold of it! The second is that that he *personifies* wisdom. We can think of wisdom as a *person*. He describes wisdom as like a 'master worker' at God's side, clearly working with him in the act of creation. And that takes us immediately to a very well-known passage in the NT, to the opening words of John's gospel: *'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being'* (Jn 1:1-3). In this passage, John is identifying the Word – the *logos* – the agent of creation - as a person, present with God before creation and through whom everything was made. The parallel with the Proverbs passage is far too strong to be ignored, so much so that we could say 'In the beginning was Wisdom'. John of course goes on to identify the Word as *Jesus* and that is where creation and Jesus fit together.

What I want to do here is to enlarge our thinking about the created order and to see how the writers of the Bible fitted together what they understood about creation, wisdom and the person called Jesus. We are invited to look at the broad canvas of Creation and see the wisdom of God in the very fabric of the canvas, in the palette of colours and the picture we behold. To change the image, this is like changing focus on a camera. You know how you can focus on a face, say, in a crowd and blur everything else: then you can change the focus and see *everybody* in the crowd. This takes the mechanical, materialistic view of creation – you know, the nuts and bolts – and to rejoice in the *wisdom* that put it together and recognize that wisdom has a Name.

Now I would like to consider the fact that, according to the bible writers, the creation is made through *wisdom*. Put another way, there is reason, a sense to it, a science to it. It is no coincidence that the cultures which have historically produced most scientific thinking are, broadly, the Jewish, Christian and Islamic. These are all cultures that have a strong

belief in the Creator and, further, that the universe was put together *rationally*. We can look down a microscope, or through a telescope, or conduct chemical experiments with molecules and atoms which are repeatable because the world and the universe is put together in a particular way. The fact that this is so is one of the arguments for the existence of God, although admittedly it's not a knockdown argument. We make great use of the fact that the created order runs along certain lines and obeys certain rules in the great scientific advances of history – advances in medicine and technology which we use every single day of our lives.

Put together, we could say that a biblical view of creation is that it is *soaked* in the wisdom and person of God. That the creation is made with wisdom, by wisdom: but by a wisdom that is way beyond physical rules, the wisdom is a person, the person of God as revealed by Jesus. This can, and should, and does lead us to wonder, to song and poetry, to worship, and to reverence. To use another strong word, it leads us to the sense that the creation is *sacred*.

A few weeks ago I was talking about the idea of a 'grand narrative'. That means a story that is held by whole cultures and which contains truths which bind us together. The story of the Bible is of course a grand narrative, a big story, which our culture has pretty much lost hold of. In a provocative article recently in *The Guardian* about the loss of the grand narrative in our culture, the writer Richard Curtis says that a new grand narrative has risen to replace the lost narratives and it is this: climate catastrophe. I have to say I think there is a lot of truth in that. Pretty much all serious politicians in this country and most of the world, following the overwhelming weight of scientific thought, admit the reality of climate change and are predicting doom and gloom if we don't change our ways radically. I'm not denying that at all. The trouble is that this 'grand narrative' is very negative: there is no vision of the glorious kingdom in it, no bright future. It is very easy for we Christians to buy into that and to be found not preaching the good news but the *bad news!*

What have we to say to that? What would *wisdom* say? Firstly, since we acknowledge that the universe is made with wisdom built into it, we had better be wise in what we do. If your car breaks down, it will be fixed by someone who is wise about cars, in other words a mechanic! He is able to fix it since he knows how the car is put together, what happens where and so on. So if it seems as if things are going badly wrong not just with a car but with the created order on planet earth – rising sea levels, unpredictable weather, desertification, flooding, loss of biological diversity – then we had better sit up and take notice of people who know about these things. That is wise! Here is the writer of Proverbs in today's reading: '*Wisdom cries out in the street: in the square she raises her voice...How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge? Give heed to my reproof; I will pour out my thoughts to you; I will make my words known to you*'. As Christians, if we say we believe in the *sacredness* of Creation – which is where our thoughts took us – then we have even more responsibility to be wise, to take this seriously.

But it still sounds like bad news, doesn't it? Where is the good news? Here's a thought, a way of looking at it. I have two words that I believe chime in with the words of Jesus very well, are wise, and take us in the right direction. They even sound and feel good! What are they? Here they are: *Travel light*. How much do we really need to live happily? How big a footprint do we need to make? I bet some of your best moments are the ones that came free. If one thing is driving climate change above all other, it is our devotion to consumption, to using up the limited resources contained on our planet. Why do we do it? In fact many people are enslaved by the thought that more is better, big is better and we have a great need of repentance. We don't have to look very far at the Bible, at the Sermon on the Mount in particular, to find plenty of scriptural backup for that, if you need it. Actually, that teaching would be classified as wisdom teaching, and we come back to our main theme. But don't the words *travel light* sound tantalizing? Why do we have to lug so much stuff around with us? Isn't it a pain? A few weeks ago, and here I 'fess up that I have flown this year – the new baggage rules on RyanAir compelled Rosemary and I to simply take one item of hand baggage with us on a trip to Denmark. No suitcases! Only what we could take on to and off the plane or we would pay a considerable charge. Firstly, it was pretty easy to cut our luggage down to the essentials and secondly it made travel a pleasure. No hanging around or sweating with big suitcases – it was basically just the two of us. Would we have been happier if we had carried more? I think not. So think of your life as a journey, for it is. What do you need? Take that, but leave behind what you don't need. Travel light! There is joy in that, not a sour face. Don't think I'm preaching harsh self-denial, miserable renunciation, that's not it at all. We are free to enjoy so much – in fact, many writers in the Bible tell us to – but we should take just what we need. Travel light!

Richard Croft