

## Wisdom and the heart for hospitality.

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*Proverbs 9:1-6; Psalm 34:9-14; Ephesians 5:11-21; John 6:51-58*

When David and I were in the Philippines we would travel to various Igorot villages so I could ask questions of the local people for my masters research. We went to incredibly isolated places where you could only get in by hiking. On the way up the mountains young men would meet us as we were trudging up. They would take our packs and sling them over their shoulders and guide us up and along the tracks. When we arrived at the village they would lead us to a central gathering area where the village elders would welcome us. We would be shown our sleeping quarters. A whole family would usually have vacated a hut so we could have privacy and a place to rest. They would then take us back for a feast. Chickens and pigs would have been killed and cooked, rice was gathered and turned into dishes — savoury and sweet. Speeches were made followed by music and dancing. I have never experienced hospitality like it before or since. Of course I have had wonderful welcome and hospitality here in Australia. I have very generous friends! But nowhere else have I been given the best and only food that people had. These people were some of the poorest people in the country and they gave joyously with open hearts and glad spirits.

This story of overwhelming and generous hospitality poses some questions for me:

How is it that these poor and struggling people can open their hearts so generously to the stranger and foreigner and give all they have but we here in Australia make the lives of refugees a never ending political football? Where is our hospitality and generous hearts? Why is it that churches that profess to follow the Lord Jesus, who gave of his very self, put up so many barriers to welcome and membership? Why is it that we batten down the hatches and fear the other rather than smile and welcome, dance for joy and delight in each others company? Why is that we find it difficult to welcome all — especially those who we may find disturbing, difficult and very different? Why do I find the practice of generous hospitality difficult?

Today's reading from Proverbs is a wonderful picture of hospitality — the hospitality of God. In this picture of hospitality, wisdom is the central character. Wisdom is the one who makes hospitality possible. My on-line dictionary says that wisdom is a deep understanding and realization of people, places, things and situations, that is reality. This deep understanding and realization results in the ability to apply perceptions, judgements and actions that are in keeping with this understanding. Wisdom often requires control of one's emotional reactions, the so-called passions.

Instead of passions, those emotional reactions, universal principles, reason and knowledge are used to determine one's actions. With wisdom decisions are made and actions taken according to principles not reactions. Therefore wisdom is the understanding of what is true plus the best judgements regarding action. That is we see the truth of something, person or situation and we make the best judgments and decisions regarding that truth.

In our reading from Proverbs wisdom is personified as a woman. Not just any woman but an independent and autonomous female entity. Wisdom is female, largely because the Hebrew noun for wisdom, *chokmahin*, is grammatically feminine. The Greek word for wisdom, *Sophia*, is also a feminine noun.

In our passage wisdom is the host of a great banquet. However, before she sets her table, she builds a house. It seems that the whole purpose of her building is hospitality; she needs a

place to host the banquet to which she will soon invite the whole world. Wisdom is no lady of leisure ordering the staff about; she has staff but works with them and does hard, manual labour herself.

Our passage tells us that Wisdom builds her own house, then she crafts seven decorative pillars — either chopping down trees or carving stones. She butchers her own fresh meat, mixes her own wine and sets her table. She then sends out her serving girls with an undisclosed task, probably invitations to specific guests. Then she herself invites complete strangers *en mass*. She goes from place to place, inviting those who do not know her at all. She calls out to them, shouting loudly in public places. She explains that the way for those who do not know her, to benefit from her, is to feast at her table. If they do so, they will live and walk in understanding or insight.

There are many more words about wisdom, both in the Old and the New Testament. There is praise of wisdom and passionate seeking for it in many religions. If wisdom is the comprehension of what is true coupled with optimum judgment and action then we can see why it is so prized and sought. The pursuit of Wisdom then is something universally human and it is present in the spiritual life of all humanity. According to the bible it is present not only in all humanity, but in the universe itself. For the universe is created by the divine power in the presence of Wisdom. This is the vision of the author of the book of Proverbs and of the poet who wrote the book of Job. Wisdom was beside God before creation of the world. “When he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him,” Wisdom says. “When he gave to the wind its weight and meted out the waters by measure; when he made a decree for the rain and a way for the lightning of the thunder, he saw Wisdom then and studied her.” The meaning of these words is that God explores Wisdom, which is like an independent power beside Him, and according to what He finds in her He forms the world. The universe in all its parts is the embodiment of wisdom. You can see why Christians have looked back to this passage and seen the Christ as the incarnated wisdom of God, the Word who was with God in the beginning.

In Jewish thought, Wisdom is the Torah. The thinking goes something like this: Both Wisdom and Torah are feminine nouns. Proverbs 3:18 says, “She is a Tree of Life,” also understood to be the Torah. Torah-knowledge, fruit from that tree, should be feasted upon like the banquet at Wisdom’s table: this is the meaning of “taste and see” from Psalm 34 that on which Brian preached so wonderfully last week. In Psalm 119 the sweetness of God’s word is compared to honey. The notion also continues in the New Testament in Revelation chapter 10. Wisdom’s table, this table of hospitality in our reading, is a metaphor for the acquisition of wisdom. We come to the table to taste and see, to feast on wisdom itself, to partake of wisdom, to become wisdom. I hope you can hear the echoes of Jesus words in the gospel — I am the bread of life ... those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them.

Proverbs tells us that those who have wisdom have life. Not just any life but a life that is upright, blessed, fruitful and favoured by God. A life that is able to discern truth and act rightly. Proverbs urges us then to seek wisdom like precious treasure and cry out for her from our hearts. It says, “The beginning of wisdom is: acquire wisdom,” “prize her,” “guard her,” and “do not let go” of her.

One may ask, “How then do I get wisdom? Once I have her how do I prize and guard her?” King Solomon just had to ask God. Out of all the things he could have asked for it was wisdom he sought and was apparently given. However, there is a step before prayer. The writers of those parts of the bible that focussed on wisdom said that the first step in acquiring wisdom is the fear of God and the awareness of the holy.

Such words can easily be misunderstood. They do not mean subjection to a god who arouses fear. Nor do they advise us to accept doctrines about God. Such a command and such advice would lead us straight away from wisdom and not towards it — well it would me! What the writer of Proverbs emphasizes is that there cannot be wisdom without an encounter with the holy, with that which creates awe, and shakes the ordinary way of life and thought. Without the experience of awe in face of the mystery of life, there is no wisdom. In this framework those who are the most removed from wisdom are not those who are driven by desire for pleasure or power, but those who have never encountered the holy, who are without awe and wonder at the mystery of creation, who hold nothing sacred.

There may be well thought through ideas. There may be workable policies. There may be solid research — but without awe there will be no wisdom. Without wisdom, ideas will be barren, policies only expedient and research will be without principles. The fear of God, or rather the awe of God, means we can see into the nature of reality and make right choices for we will be both constrained and released. By that I mean we will be humble in the face of the mystery of life and not assume we can or should manipulate and control reality *and* we will be released from our need to do so. We will be humble when we are making judgements, humble when we make decisions, humble taking action.

Knowing our limits and accepting them is the decisive step towards wisdom. In contrast the fool holds nothing sacred, has no fear of God, no awe in the face of the divine. They rebel against the limits set by their finitude, their humanity. In comparison if we can know we are not God, if we can instead let God be God, we will begin to have half of chance of aligning our lives by God's principles and ways. We can let go of fear. We can open our hearts. We can practice the same hospitality that Lady Wisdom shows and that God reveals so radically in Jesus Christ.

I do not think many people today have the fear of God. I certainly do not think our current batch of political leaders do. Perhaps I am being harsh. I know some of the issues we face in this country are complex and difficult. Yet I do not see much wisdom around me. I do not see it in myself very much at times! What I do see is a whole lot of people sure they are right and everyone else is wrong. I see the most vulnerable in our society ignored and demonized. I see people excluded in subtle and obvious ways because they are the wrong colour, race, religion, sexual orientation and gender. I see a table of abundance set in this country to which it seems only the privileged and lucky are invited.

You know sometimes I wish that the fear of God were more than awe in the presence of the mystery of life and its creator. Sometimes I want God to be a punitive God who would come down and punish the wicked, the cruel, the apathetic and comfortable. I can understand sometimes how the psalmist feels when he or she cries out to God for justice. "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream," as the prophet Amos writes. But, I know that such a God would judge me also. As Paul in Romans says, all have fallen short of the glory of God.

So let us then pray for the ability to see into the nature of reality, for our eyes to be open, the thoughts of our hearts made clear. Let us pray for a sense of the presence of God and sense of awe in God's creation so we may be humble and open to truth and right action. Let us count on God's mercy and forgiveness, his compassion and understanding, his wisdom, her abundant provision. Let us let go of all fear, other than the fear of God. Let us come to Jesus Christ, Word and Wisdom made flesh, and find in Christ the way, the truth and the life for all. Let us pray that his Holy Spirit will live and love in us. Let us pray for the gift of wisdom. Amen.