

Wisdom Calls

A sermon on Proverbs 1:20-33 & Mark 8:27-38 by Nathan Nettleton, 15 September 2024

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Message

Jesus carries and embodies the Biblical tradition of wisdom, calling us to let go of our self-focussed lives and expand into new lives of wisdom, love and compassion.

Sermon

There was an incident at the end of Friday night's AFL footy finals game between Port Adelaide and Hawthorn which had a few people talking about wisdom, or the lack of it. A young Hawthorn player had made a brash and stupid comment on social media during the week that was quite disrespectful towards Port Adelaide, and the Port coach had apparently been using that comment during the week to motivate his players. But at the end of the game, which Port Adelaide narrowly won, that winning coach, who is normally much loved and respected, taunted the young player from the losing team in his moment of loss.

It was stupid and unnecessary, and unbecoming of a man of his age and stature in the game, and by the time he got to his press conference about half an hour later, he was already apologising and obviously embarrassed by his own lack of wisdom and grace. After taking umbrage at an unwise comment by a 21 year old, he had ended up making himself look even more juvenile and unwise.

In tonight's first reading from the book of Proverbs, we encountered a character called Wisdom who has a bit to say about that sort of thing. The book of Proverbs is one of a group of books in the Hebrew Bible that are often called wisdom literature, and I know that a number of you who are regularly at our daily Vespers liturgies have been enjoying this few weeks of wisdom readings from Proverbs.

It would be a mistake though to see wisdom as a theme that was confined to these few so-called wisdom books. Many preachers and theologians talk about a wisdom tradition that runs all the way through our Bible, and they argue that that wisdom tradition is an important way of understanding and living the gospel. Many of them say that, in his day, Jesus would have been seen and understood as a wisdom teacher, and that we can't really understand what he was on about unless we give proper attention to that role.

Our reading tonight came from the opening chapter of Proverbs, and it portrayed wisdom as a person, indeed as a woman. This is far from the only passage in the Bible that does that; it happens several times in the book of Proverbs, and in various other places too. It is clear that this character called Wisdom is being identified with God's wisdom, and in fact identified with God. Many therefore argue that this female personification of wisdom is actually a way of talking about the Holy Spirit.

However, trying to get any sort of certainty about the persons of the Trinity from the Bible is always elusive and complicated, and you might be surprised to find that there is at least as much evidence for equating this Lady Wisdom character with Jesus. The Revd Dr Sally Douglas, who was a member of this congregation back before she became a celebrated New Testament scholar, has written a well-received academic book titled *Early Church Understandings of Jesus as the Female Divine*. She shows convincingly how many early church writers including

those in the New Testament drew heavily on the Hebrew wisdom traditions as they formulated and presented their understandings of Jesus.

However, I'm not going to try to make intellectual sense of the Trinity tonight, and I suspect that the Wisdom tradition itself would not regard that as a wise thing to try to do in twenty minutes if I did. Being wise is certainly not the same thing as being smart or intellectually clever. One can be clever, smart, and knowledgeable, *and* wise, but one can also be all those things and not wise. Just ask the Port Adelaide coach. Many of those with whom Jesus had his biggest disagreements were regarded as the smartest people in the room every day of the week. He didn't dispute their intellectual capability; he questioned their wisdom.

Now to be fair, you wouldn't pick up the distinction between wisdom and knowledge or intellect from the passage we heard tonight from Proverbs. Reading this passage alone could leave you with a fairly simplistic binary view with wisdom, knowledge, and good counsel lined up on one side, and foolishness, waywardness, and pig-headedness on the other, with Lady Wisdom beckoning us to cross from the wrong side to the right.

In fact, more than just overly binary, you can get a quite ugly picture of Lady Wisdom from this passage, one that sounds more like that Port Adelaide coach, because she is depicted as saying:

because you have ignored all my counsel
and would have none of my reproof,
I will laugh at your calamity;
I will mock when panic strikes you,
when distress and anguish come upon you.

Always with these ancient Biblical texts, we have to remember that they reflect the community of God's people striving to make sense of their experience of God in the world, and always there is this complex mix of genuine revelation and very human background assumptions. And one of the assumptions that is reflected repeatedly in the book of Proverbs is that any sort of disaster is a divine punishment and therefore proof of sin and foolishness. It is an assumption we often instinctively feel when faced with disaster – “Why me?!” – but one that Jesus refuted. As is often the case, the presence of competing viewpoints within the Bible is crucial to enabling us to understand the emerging trajectory of God's unfolding revelation.

But the wisdom tradition of the Bible as a whole is more subtle and nuanced and compassionate than the snapshot of it in this passage. What it consistently holds in common with this passage is that it always presents wisdom as a choice, something we either pursue or reject. But it also presents wisdom as something we simply encounter, something God places before us often unexpectedly, and that we either recognise in those moments, or we don't.

You can see this illustrated and unpacked in tonight's gospel reading, which provides one of the clearest examples of Jesus functioning in the role of the spiritual wisdom teacher. It begins with this thing about recognition. Can you recognise wisdom when you encounter it, or do you write it off as something else? Or even take offence at it?

Jesus asks his followers what people are saying about him. “Who do people say that I am?” Clearly people are saying lots of things about him, because the disciples quickly come up with quite a list: “John the Baptist, or Elijah, or another of the prophets.” Maybe there were more

opinions than listed here too. “Some say you’re a heretic. Some say you’re off your tree. Some say you’re a very naughty boy!” Who knows what was said, but after listening to their summary of the public speculations, Jesus asks, “Who do you say that I am?”

I imagine there was an awkward pause before anyone answered here; a few feet shuffling awkwardly, and eyes darting left and right, hoping someone else would go first. And it was probably quite a vulnerable moment for Jesus. “Do any of these people really get me? Even these people who I’ve invested a lot of time in and who’ve been hearing everything I’ve been teaching for some time; do even they recognise me for who I am? Or have I been wasting my breath?”

There will have been a lot of sermons around the world today commending Simon Peter for giving the right answer, but actually, it is not at all clear whether Jesus regarded it as the right answer. Jesus doesn’t say one way or the other what he thinks of Peter labelling him as the Messiah, but he very clearly tells Peter to keep his mouth shut and keep that opinion to himself. And then he launches into some wisdom teaching which Peter immediately rejects as being inappropriate for the Messiah, so even if Messiah might be a correct label, Peter has clearly misunderstood it badly enough that he might as well just be wrong.

Whatever Jesus might have been hoping they would say, the question is one about what they recognise in him. Which in the Wisdom tradition might even be phrased as “What inside of you recognises me?” Because there is some truth in the “takes one to know one” principle. If we have any spiritual wisdom within us, it will recognise Wisdom when she comes to us, when she beckons us to follow. The more that wisdom has taken root within us and begun to work its way thoroughly through our attitudes and behaviours, the more instinctively we will recognise it when it approaches.

It is from this “who am I” recognition question that Jesus moves into his teaching about those wishing to follow him needing to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow. I want us to give our attention to this teaching now, because I think it is hugely misunderstood and mainly so because it is not recognised and interpreted as an expression of the wisdom tradition.

The problem is that we evangelical Christians have typically reduced our understandings of the cross to a kind of transaction. Forgiveness of our sins needs to be purchased from God at the price of the sacrificial death of a perfect human being, and now that Jesus has paid that price, we gain access to that forgiveness and a ticket to heaven by simply believing correctly that that is what he has done, or putting our faith in the facts of that transaction. So in that model, denying yourself and taking up your cross becomes little more than renouncing your previous beliefs and allegiances, and becoming part of the winning team by believing in the cross as your ticket to heaven.

I’m pretty sure that that is not what Jesus was saying.

One of the unfortunate byproducts of that simplistic evangelical view is that it renders Jesus’s teaching ministry fairly irrelevant, especially as Jesus said very little in his teachings that would support that transactional view of the gospel. The heart of what Jesus proclaimed and taught was not free tickets to heaven for those who believe right, it was “the kingdom of God is at hand, emerging among us”. And the first response that that message calls forth from us is again that recognition thing. If the kingdom of God is emerging, where do you recognise it?

What within you recognises it? What within you resonates with it and instinctively welcomes it and wants to get on board?

And speaking specifically about what he had come to do in the world, Jesus didn't say I have come in order to get killed to ensure that however horrible life is now, you'll be okay because you can go to heaven when it's over. He said, "I have come that people might have life, and have it to the full." Not after they die. Now. Here. Jesus came so that life here and now might be transformed and lived to the full. He came so that we might be set free from being petty, judgemental, ego-centric, resentful jerks, and might instead grow into love and compassion and understanding and acceptance. "I have come that you might have life, and have it to the full." This is what Jesus was teaching.

So, what's this stuff about denying yourself and giving up your life for the gospel then? It's for real. It is the pathway of wisdom.

At the level of our basic animal instincts, we are driven by the need to survive and we will compete as aggressively as needed to come out on top and survive. And in our need to believe in our own goodness, we will judge others harshly and cut them down in order to carve out our place at the top. I remember hearing of a major advertising executive who had a plaque on his desk that said, "It is not enough to win; others must lose."

The pathway of wisdom which Jesus came to teach us and demonstrate for us invites us to a way out of the slavery of that kind of dog-eat-dog life. But there is no way out that doesn't require breaking our addiction to me, me, me. And that is, at first, going to feel like the most painful self-denial, like laying down our lives, like picking up a cross so that we can be crucified on it.

Sometimes we see Lady Wisdom beckoning, and we are able to lay down our lives willingly and follow. Other times, life almost strips us of our self-obsessions, but we can still choose to cooperate or choose to flee back and try to rebuild our self-centred old selves.

Some of you may have seen or read the recent interview with the singer Nick Cave on the ABC. He acknowledged that in his youth he was completely besotted with his own genius, but then he lost two of his children in separate tragedies, one of them aged 15 and the other aged 31. Understandably he was in a dark place for a long time, and there are several very dark albums that were written and recorded from that dark place. But then he spoke about how the unbearable grief led him beyond his self-obsession and into a place of compassion. He realised that grief is not some strange and rare aberration, but is something that everyone experiences in their life, sooner or later, and which can enrich us if we let it. It can reconnect us with each other in place of compassion instead of rivalry. In the depths of the grief, Nick Cave found the path beyond, the path of Wisdom, the path to life in all its fullness.

It doesn't always take tragedy of that scale to break us free and turn us around, but if tragedy does find us, Lady Wisdom will be there, calling in the midst of it. But Lady Wisdom was already there, and is always there, calling us to choose life. You don't have to wait for tragedy to strike, you can voluntarily deny yourself and take up our cross, and surrender to wisdom, and the path to life in all its fullness will be there before you.

Jesus, the embodiment of Lady Wisdom, is constantly calling us to let go of our self-focused lives and expand into new lives of wisdom, love and compassion. It is a costly call because the way of wisdom can never just be a nice add-on to our lives, the cherry on top of otherwise untouched lives. The way of wisdom is so radically incompatible with the assumptions we grew up grounding our lives in that embracing it is never an add-on but a re-writing of the whole operating system of our lives. But the call to deny ourselves and take up our cross is never an end in itself. The pain is not the point. The path of self-denial is simply the necessary clearing of the decks that makes room for new life, for life in all its fullness.

Lady Wisdom cries out in the street. Jesus beckons to you from every crossroad and corner of your life. Lay down your broken lives and follow, follow into life, life in all its fullness.