

“Truthfully Wise, or Wisely Truthful?” – Prov 8:1-4,22-31 – May 22, 2016

Wow! Why do I do it to myself? Once again, on one of the busiest weeks, I decided to preach a brand-new sermon on a text that I’ve never tackled before – today’s reading from Proverbs. Back on Tuesday when I picked this reading so we could start getting ready this seemed like a harmless enough plan, but as the week wound on and I researched the text I became increasingly concerned. Why my concern? Well, it turns out this is possibly one of the most contentious and contended passages in the bible; moreover this is Trinity Sunday. Many if not most preachers prefer to step aside today and let a guest preacher sweat it out, because preaching on the Trinity is a huge challenge.

Back to my own question, namely “why do I do it to myself?” I think the answer is three-fold: I thought it was time for something fresh and new; the reading from John’s gospel is short; and I like a challenge. Please bear with me and let’s see if we can hear a cogent and meaningful message from Proverbs that will both deepen and enliven our faith and understanding.

And there, right off the mark is one of the issues with which we need to deal before we delve deeper into the text – what is the difference, if any, between wisdom and understanding? Or for that matter, between wisdom and knowledge? And what or who is this Wisdom who is speaking in the text? So many questions ... where to begin?

I believe we are helped in our search if we first of all recognize that this piece of text from Proverbs is, like virtually all of the book of Proverbs, poetic; i.e. it is a poem, and like most poetry uses imagery to convey the author’s intent. The image here is that of Wisdom personified in the form of a woman crying out to all who would hear. She is presented as a virtuous woman in sharp contrast with a much different kind of woman in the previous chapter. Part of the reason that Wisdom is presented as a woman is due to the fact that the word for wisdom in Hebrew is feminine ... in English we have a third category for nouns in addition to masculine and feminine, namely neuter. For example, a rock is neither masculine nor feminine, but neuter. (of course there are the usual exceptions, such as the tradition of referring to a ship as ‘she’). However, in Hebrew and in many other languages, nouns can be only either masculine or feminine. What the logic is for assigning which gender to which noun I do not know, but in Hebrew wisdom is feminine. It seems likely that the gender of the noun ‘wisdom’ may have helped inspire the poet-author of Proverbs to personify Wisdom as a woman. It seems possible also that the declared involvement of Wisdom in creation resonates with women’s role in bringing new life into being.

We also need to deal with another huge problem that has arisen out of this text over the centuries. That problem begins with the assertion that the speaker, Wisdom, is Christ. Such an assertion seems reasonable enough at first glance, especially given the promise of the Holy Spirit in the gospels, the linking of the Logos or Word in the opening to John’s gospel, and the formalization of a doctrine of the Holy Trinity. However, taking the position that Christ is the one speaking here in Proverbs raises a couple of issues. The first is that the speaker is a woman, and how do we resolve Christ being a woman? We could fall back on declarations such as the one in Genesis about being created male and female in God’s image, or refer to Christ’s redeeming power being for both, but any explanation seems to leave this particular issue unresolved. A more serious issue does arise, and has even led to a major heresy, and that is to combine the identifying of Christ as Wisdom here with the concept of being created by God as stated in verse 22, leading to a belief that Christ was a created being rather than one with God. The problem arises partly because of a possible bad translation in the ancient Greek version of the Hebrew scriptures, but more so from the claim that the speaker in Proverbs is Christ. We

need to pull back from imposing a Christian overlay on the text, and hear the poetry as it was originally meant to be heard.

By now your head may be spinning, so let's go back and review the text. Our reading from Proverbs begins with the description of Wisdom crying out to all who would hear, closely paralleling the opening verses of the book itself. Not in secret places, not behind closed doors, not only in the chambers of power, but "On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out". The affirmations proclaimed here are not only to a select few, not only to a special group, but are meant to be heard and responded to by "all that live". The message here is for all who would seek to be wise, who would desire to move beyond mere knowledge to understanding shaped by experience. Knowledge is good; knowing facts and data is important for without such knowledge we are unable to cope with even the simplest tasks of life. For example, knowing what time the buses stop running helps us to avoid standing at a bus stop all night or having to walk home. Realizing that economic factors affect bus schedules helps us to understand why the bus stops running overnight. Wisdom is using that knowledge and understanding to plan our activities so as not to be negatively affected.

Wisdom is experiential; that is to say that wisdom is only gained through experience. (One expression I find relevant is "you cannot put an old man's head on a young man's shoulders!") Some would claim, however, that it is possible to gain experience through absorbing the experiences of others and that is perhaps the motivation here in Proverbs 8. Wisdom personified here claims the credentials of ultimate experience, being part of everything from the very beginning of everything – what more complete experience could there be than that?! But that experience was anything but passive and unemotional, as we should also note carefully the incredibly positive outcome of all that experience, namely "rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race." This is not the voice of doom and gloom, a voice made bitter through hard and painful experience, a voice of dejection and negativity, but instead this is an exuberant and joyful voice celebrating a wondrous creation, humanity. This is a voice crying out to all who would listen to embrace all of the good things that life has to offer, to choose the thoughts and actions that are pleasing to the creator, redeemer, and sustainer we honour as God and Christ and the Holy Spirit.

And that points us to another understanding, namely that wisdom implies choosing. It is not sufficient to be wise but to sit in isolation doing nothing. The image of a sage or guru sitting in lonely solitude on a mountain top contemplating the whichness of what is familiar and in times of stress even appealing, but the reality is that we live in the real world, in the highways and byways, at the city gates and in the marketplaces, and living life requires a constant stream of decisions. Wisdom is the guiding force that helps us to make 'good' decisions; i.e. decisions that result in actions that are positive, healthy, creative rather than destructive, just and merciful instead of mean and degrading, loving and supportive as opposed to hateful or hurtful. Wisdom does not arise out of nothingness, and we are reminded in Proverbs that the Wisdom we are called to heed arises from a relationship with God. It is in relationship with God that we find the wisdom that invokes the kind of behaviour that exhibits these positive behaviours.

How can we begin to separate the wisdom that comes from God from other pressures that would also claim to be wise? The answer lies in the related reading from John's gospel, in which we hear Jesus declare "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come." Truth and wisdom are irrevocably linked; wisdom without truth is not wise,

and truth without wisdom is like faith without works. Just as Wisdom cries out to all who would hear, the Spirit flows freely into all who would be open to being guided. We cannot touch Wisdom, we cannot grasp hold of the Spirit, but both will if we are open and accepting in our faith steer and guide us to a life that is free, and abundant, and rich, and fulfilling.

That is what we wisely and truly celebrate this Trinity Sunday: the gift of life and life abundant, made available by our creator, restored by our redeemer, and sustained by our comfort and guide, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God whom we adore.