

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

TRINITY SUNDAY

SUNDAY 30 MAY 2010

Mr Robert Sanderson

Proverbs 8: 1 - 4, 22 - 31; John 16: 12 - 15

"Divine Wisdom"

At Pentecost we looked at the breaking into our lives of the Spirit. Today, we hear the call of the Spirit. We will look at the Spirit as Divine Wisdom. Last week, we saw how beneficial interaction between the cultures is. This idea is still with us in our minds today because we are examining a very special reading from the book of Proverbs. The address is in three parts.

The first is to examine 'wisdom' in the Proverbs reading. Then two important examples in our modern world. And finally we return to the notion of wisdom in our lives in the light of Jesus of Nazareth.

1. Wisdom – *Hokmah*

Proverbs is one of the books in the Hebrew texts called 'wisdom literature'. It is a diverse collection of sayings drawn from many of the surrounding cultures. Today's passages are from King Solomon himself. The first thing that strikes us is that Wisdom is female. "Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice?" (v.1) We learn in the second part that Wisdom was created *before* everything else. It is almost as though God needs a help-mate to create the world, and her name is Wisdom. ("then I was beside him like a master-worker." v.30)

Just savour that thought for a while. The very first thing created was Wisdom...

Bruce Epperly describes it this way:

The theology of Proverbs 8 is subtle but inspiring. God creates the world in delight and beauty. Truly Sophia, divine wisdom, dances alongside – and within - God as an artist and companion, a cosmic child, joyfully bringing forth galaxy upon galaxy at the macro level, and the movements of our cells and the summer fireflies at the micro level. Proverbs' image of divine wisdom reflects the unity of salvation and creation in God's relationship to the world.

We are used to hearing wisdom described in religion as "fear of the Lord". The word 'fear' is a real problem for us today. In the context of scripture, it does not mean 'being afraid'. It means 'respect' or 'stand in awe and wonder'. Who cannot look at the heavens and not marvel? But in Proverbs 8 we have the Divine Feminine. The Hebrew word used here for wisdom is *Hokmah* which is the ability to translate thought into action. Take note of this because it means wisdom is not passive.

We often associate wisdom with age – the older you are, the wiser you become. If only that were true! No, wisdom *calls*; wisdom demands action. We must really work hard at it to examine our experiences and to learn from them; to apply them to the present and to project them into a meaningful vision of the future. It is a real engagement with life. It forces us to be in a perpetual state of change. It is what drives us to live a rewarding life – to be the best we can be.

And now two examples of wisdom demanding action.

2. Two reflections on our modern world.

For those who were not here last week I would like to recall a key element we discussed concerning the story of the Tower of Babel. I described this as a 'myth'. Today, we tend to think of this as something that is not true. This is unfortunate because, while myths are not to be taken literally, they do have their own 'truth'. I pointed out that Karen Armstrong in *The Case for God* says a myth's "purpose is to help us contemplate the human predicament."

The Proverbs reading includes an addition to the creation stories in Genesis. These stories too are myths. Their purpose is to explain the existence of this wonderful world in all its diversity. Each succeeding story adds more explanations to the mix.

A. Science and Religion We increasingly seem to hear science and religion being pitted against one another. This is nothing new, but at the present time this antagonism has increased its impact on the society for the worse. The rise of creationism from fundamentalist churches has reached a point where science is being challenged for no other reason than a literal reading of scripture. Creationism and 'intelligent design' are making inroads into education systems around the world. These views are held by 40% of Americans. The main idea is that the world developed literally as depicted in Genesis around 6,000 years ago. It would be one thing if these were matters of belief, but they see them as an alternative *science* taught in schools and even some universities. Only last week Northern Ireland's Culture Minister demanded that the Ulster Museum mount displays consistent with these views.

Religions have had a checkered history with evolutionary theory over the years. One major point has been over the anthropocentric view of the universe: that humankind is the pinnacle of creation. The probability that we are the only intelligent life form in the universe is minute. Complaining about this sounds suspiciously like the greed and superiority of nineteenth century imperialism. (Or should that be 21st century globalism?) In either case it suggests that the world is there to be endlessly used and exploited.

If people want to use the creation stories to justify this, then they are wrong.

There are two expressions from Genesis that need to be clarified.

First, the notion that humans are to "subdue the earth". This does not mean do what you like with the earth, it is simply a reference to agriculture and means that humans are to be vegetarians.

Second, the notion that humans are to "have dominion over" all the living things. This doesn't mean doing what you like with them. It means to care for all creatures. That sounds pretty much like a sustainable earth to me.

Another problem is that the level of dialogue between science and religion is not all that it could be as this joke implies.

A scientist and a theologian are sitting on an airplane, and strike up a conversation. Inevitably, the conversation turns to what they each do for a living. The theologian says, "I teach ethics in a seminary." The scientist says, "Well, that must be very simple. After all, 'Love your neighbor as yourself' really captures it all, doesn't it?"

Then the scientist says, "I'm an astronomer." And the theologian exclaims, "That must be very

simple. After all, 'Twinkle twinkle little star' is really all there is to it."

It is time that the churches who do not take scripture literally spoke up and supported the scientific community more. There is no reason why science and religion should not engage together. They have much to offer one another. Science can illuminate faith and religion can offer ethics to science. The scientific discoveries in the next 30 years will make life on earth very, very different and the ethical questions will become increasingly more important.

B. Global Warming A very strange event occurred this year. In January, the world was committed to the scientific view that human activity is responsible for climate change and we must take steps to minimize the effect of global warming. The scientific evidence was the result of research from every country all over the world. The summit at Copenhagen failed to make any gains for economic and political reasons. The immediate effect this had was a rise in an attitude directed against the *science* of climate change. It is an interesting social phenomenon.

Martin Rees, President of the Royal Society and Astronomer Royal, was asked about this in an interview on the ABC. He said he was perplexed that in Australia (or anywhere else) the climate change debate has been reduced to *believers* and *non-believers*. Note this well – a science debate reduced to whether people believe it or not.

Lord Rees had this to say about it.

I think to explain why it's controversial one could give an analogy of medical expertise.

If you look on the internet about any disease for instance you find a whole range of views. But no-one is going to attach equal weight to everything on the internet about some disease. If you want treatment you look at the credentials of the people and you take notice of those who have real credentials.

I think if people did the same with regard to climate change and realised that most of those who have genuine credentials have a fairly consistent view then they would realise that it is something which shouldn't be quite so controversial.

But having said that of course even if you accept the science then what to do about it is a very difficult political issue because it's got to be something where we act internationally. And also it's an issue where the risks and benefits are very long term. And in politics the urgent always trumps the important.

I think this issue suggests that science education has failed. Far too many people do not understand how science works. Lord Rees mentioned the Internet, but I also think it has a lot to do with science reporting in the media. I don't want to complain about the media because I have the utmost respect for the many world class journalists we have in this country. But I do think that science is too important to be reduced to a curiosity show. When a scientific paper is reported in only half a dozen lines with no discussion, it can lead to gross misunderstandings. It must also be said that the abuse of "statistics" in reporting is legion.

3. Wisdom – *Sophia*

The Greek word for wisdom is *sophia* and in the early Jesus communities wisdom was one of the gifts from God. Both the Hebrew and the Greek words for wisdom are feminine. This enabled people to imagine God in human form. Her symbol is a dove which links in with the gospel accounts of Jesus'

baptism. In later times, she was venerated by some branches of the Eastern Church. She is sometimes depicted with her children, Faith, Hope and Charity (Love).

It is odd that people should find that the Christian texts are contrary to evolutionary theory since the whole idea of the Kingdom of Heaven is about change; about creation not being completed; about a continual evolution to a higher state.

Sr Joan Chittister has this to say:

“As time goes by two things become more and more apparent: first, that life is a process, not a place. And secondly, that it is wisdom that leads us there.

‘Holy One, what is the difference between knowledge and wisdom?’ the disciple asked. And the Holy One answered: “When you have knowledge, you use a torch to show the way. When you are wise, you become the torch.”

This really is the challenge to us all. Engage with wisdom as difficult as that may be. Follow your path and gain knowledge. A journey is broken if you are stationary. Change is growth. Live a good life to the full. Learn from life. Wisdom is calling to us always and everywhere. Dance and revel in wisdom’s guidance.

God is love, and divine love is wisdom at the centre of acts of beauty, compassion and justice.