

The Beginning of Wisdom

FIRST READING: Proverbs 1:1-7

The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:

- 2 For learning about wisdom and instruction,
for understanding words of insight,
3 for gaining instruction in wise dealing,
righteousness, justice, and equity;
4 to teach shrewdness to the simple,
knowledge and prudence to the young—
5 let the wise, too, hear and gain in learning
and the discerning acquire skill,
6 to understand a proverb and a figure,
the words of the wise and their riddles.
7 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction.*

GOSPEL READING: Matthew 13:10-17

*Then the disciples came and asked him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” 11 He answered, “To you it has been given to know the secrets**[b]** of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. 12 For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance, but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. 13 The reason I speak to them in parables is that ‘seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.’ 14 With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says: ‘You will indeed listen but never understand, and you will indeed look but never perceive. 15 For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes, so that they might not look with their eyes, and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn—and I would heal them.’ 16 “But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. 17 Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.*

Wisdom: the dictionary defines it as the soundness of an action or decision with regard to the application of experience, knowledge, and good judgment. Remember the quip that intelligence is knowing the tomato is a fruit. Wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad. Individuals who respond sensibly in a situation. You can likely think of people you have met that have been wise. Not only having knowledge, but knowing how to use it.

Wisdom can also be communal, or group wisdom. The body of knowledge and principles that develops within a specified society or period. The traditional wisdom of Chinese medicine, or farming practices of Ghana, or hunting of the Siksika nation.

And so we come to the wisdom literature of ancient societies. Wisdom is not unique to the Hebrew peoples. Egyptian and Aramaic and other middle eastern cultures also have wisdom traditions, and some of the proverbs are even borrowed from these more ancient cultures. Proverbs are meant to be read reflectively, not quickly consumed. They are more ambiguous than prose, more like poetry. And wisdom is more than intellectual mental activity. It is skill, applied knowledge. Practical skill for living well - so it has a lot to do with how one defines the good life.

Prov 1:1 "The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel"

- 1 Kings 3 Solomon asks God for wisdom.
- 1 Kings 4: 29-33 *God gave Solomon very great wisdom, discernment, and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore, ³⁰ so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the East and all the wisdom of Egypt. ³¹ He was wiser than anyone else, wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite and Heman, Calcol, and Darda, children of Mahol; his fame spread throughout all the surrounding nations. ³² He composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five. ³³ He would speak of trees, from the cedar that is in the Lebanon to the hyssop that grows in the wall; he would speak of animals, and birds, and reptiles, and fish. ³⁴ People came from all the nations to hear the wisdom of Solomon, from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom.*

Kings Solomon builds the second temple in his reign which marked what we would call the beginning of the theological school where rabbis would be taught. So Solomon is what you might call the patron saint of Hebrew wisdom, and many scholars conclude that this first verse was likely added later as introduction. There are several evidences pointing this way. Other authors mentioned like Agur and Lemuel. Proverbs aren't a literary style that a person sits down and writes, rather they are generally gathered from generations of oral wisdom.

As we come to the reading of the book of Proverbs we also need to remember that it is part of the Wisdom literature of the Biblical canon. It is not meant to be read in isolation, but in the context of other Hebrew literature.

Rabbis have quipped that - Proverbs is young teacher. Ecclesiastes is jaded middle age. Job is experienced elder. Others say Song of Solomon is naivete of youth, Proverbs maturity of middle age, and Ecclesiastes the disillusion of old age.

Proverbs and Song of Solomon remind the worried, the uncertain, the cynical of positive insights and of possibilities to reframe their attitudes. Ecclesiastes and Job remind the confident, trusting and naive of questions they need to take into account rather than thinking they have the truth all buttoned up.

So who is Proverbs for? The second and third verses of that first chapter read:

*For learning about wisdom and instruction,
for understanding words of insight,
3 for gaining instruction in wise dealing,
righteousness, justice, and equity;*

Proverbs is for everyone willing to learn. Like the parables, some will not be willing to hear or see, or seek understanding and growth. I got interested in Proverbs in university. I was getting so much information, but was it wisdom? I figured if Proverbs had 31 chapters, I could read a chapter a day, and did so for several months.

These verses also introduce us to Wisdom vocabulary: teaching, understanding, insight, prudence, knowledge, training, admonition, correction, discretion. And the ethical dimensions of wisdom: righteousness, justice, virtue.

The passage continues:

*to teach shrewdness to the simple,
knowledge and prudence to the young—
5 let the wise, too, hear and gain in learning
and the discerning acquire skill,
6 to understand a proverb and a figure,
the words of the wise and their riddles.*

Proverbs is for the simple and experienced. Always something to be gained. Simple are not fools or mockers because they are teachable. The advanced also benefit from reflection.

Proverb is a short, pithy observation, admonition, warning or prohibition but these sayings have 9 chapters of introduction. Not bumper sticker wisdom. Part of the wisdom of Proverbs is that they are not applied in isolation. Only true when stated at the right time and circumstance. Have to be able to read people and the situation to apply.

Finally in this first section we come to the theological foundation both of the book of Proverbs and of wisdom.

*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction.*

This, or a close variation, is repeated for emphasis 20 more times in the book of Proverbs. The presence of Yahweh is a unique feature of Proverbs in the international wisdom tradition.

Tremper Longman in his commentary on Proverbs illustrates that "One might be an expert say on sailing ... but they do not understand who made the winds & the sea, who ultimately guides one's way. True knowledge begins with an acknowledgement that everything is created and sustained by God and that he imparts knowledge not only through revelation but also through experience, observation and reason." (Longman 101).

This is the foundation. Wisdom is in the context of a relationship with God. Sages understand their unique place in the universe. Creation and wisdom are inextricably bound. The best way to know how to get on in the world is to become acquainted with the One so intimately involved in its creation.

So what do we do with the word “fear”? As we looked at this verse with the elders at our last session meeting, we talked about how fear is not terror, but it is more than respect. It is recognition of a subservient position and acknowledgement of one's dependence on Yahweh. Only fools would not be afraid of a being who has the power of life & death.

The awe of “fear” places the reader in proper size. We are not the centre of the universe. We are equals with our neighbours created in the image of God. We are discovering God's design for creation, not concocting our own. Ray Aldred, Indigenous Studies Program at VST, spoke about how in Indigenous training the question of “Is there a God” doesn't arise. Indigenous people saw the settlers pray and so they believed they could build relationship together because these newcomers had a correct ordering of life.

But we are prone to make God work for us rather than walking upon the earth as sacred time and space. We must begin with God at the centre in order to see and hear well.

Wisdom, as we've seen, is far more than cleverness or knowledge—it is the art of living well in right relationship: with ourselves, with others, with creation, and ultimately with God. The book of Proverbs invites us into a lifelong journey of learning, reflection, and humility. It doesn't offer simple answers, but rather equips us with tools—insight, prudence, discernment—to navigate life's complexities.

At its heart, biblical wisdom begins with awe—a deep reverence for the Creator who orders and sustains all things. So whether we are young and simple, or wise and seasoned, there is always more to learn. Wisdom is not a destination, but a way. And in a world filled with noise and easy answers, may we be people who seek wisdom—not just to know, but to live well.

May it be so in our lives and in our life together. Amen.