

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 19th August 2018

Proverbs 9: 1 - 6

Almighty God, your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ is the light of the world. May your people, illuminated by your Word, shine with radiance of his glory, that his love may be known in the world as he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit one God, now and forever. Amen.

There's not enough wisdom in the world. But, don't worry; today I am going to teach you where you can find wisdom. You won't find it on the shelves of our nation's bookshops, but - with a child starting school this past week - I hope that it can be found in the classrooms of the nation's schools.

On the shelves of our nation's bookshops, masquerading as wisdom, there are plenty of self-help books covering whatever area of help you need: for example, leadership and management, weight loss, romantic success, how to make friends, how to make the most of your day, how to stay healthy, and many others.

These books masquerade as wisdom when they follow a particular dynamic: someone else knows something you don't, and that person will only share that knowledge with you for a price. For the money you pay for this knowledge you will receive at the end of the book some sort of reward; perhaps a financial reward, or perhaps more success in some area of your life.

Books aren't the only place you might find this kind of wisdom, you could go and listen to an inspirational speaker, perhaps a former politician for example, but of course once again you'll have to pay. The speaker will dramatise the presentation of the knowledge he or she has that you don't, and there will be a promise of some reward at the end if you do what he or she says.

That is this world's wisdom today, and there is plenty of it around, and the problem with it is that it is not wisdom. If you buy one of those inspirational self-help books on success or leadership or romance or friendship, you'll spend money, but the book will probably languish unread on your bookshelf.

If you do ever get-round to reading it, it probably won't be a fun read; it will probably be a bit of a chore. You'll probably not finish it, but if you do it will always be a chore trying to remember what the book taught and how to implement it in your life. The promised rewards of self-improvement, if they're there at all, will be fleeting, forgotten, and flippant.

Today, I want you to learn where true wisdom is to be found. True wisdom is not expensive, it does not feel like a chore to acquire it, it is not fleeting or easily forgotten, or flippant. Instead, true wisdom is free, it is fabulous fun, it is feminine, and it is subversive. There she is - Wisdom - in our reading this morning from the book of Proverbs, and she is inviting you to a fabulous feast, free of charge.

*Wisdom has built her house ... she has killed a beast and spiced her wine ...
Come in, she says, come dine with me and taste the wine and you will live.¹*

Wisdom appears in the Bible in a number of books, but most prominently and purely in three Old Testament books, the books of Ecclesiastes (the book that begins with the words, vanity of vanities, all is vanities), Job (the book where disasters befall Job for no apparent reason), and the book of Proverbs (the book filled with aphorisms, pithy sayings of helpful advice). There are other places and books in the Bible where Wisdom is to be found, but these three offer the greatest concentration of Wisdom.

This Wisdom literature has a history as part of the Bible. The history of belief in God in the Old Testament goes something like this; Wisdom appears at the end. In the early days of Old Testament history God was believed to be a God who was present and active in the world. God was all-knowing, and enforced a basic and binding moral law code. The faithful were rewarded, and the wicked were punished. The world was orderly and predictable. Your job as a believer was to follow the rules and prosper, only a fool would do otherwise.

Then, in Old Testament history everything collapsed. Israel was invaded, and the tribes of Israel were carried off in to exile. In exile the God of Israel changed. In this part of the Old Testament the world is now described in an upside down way. It is the righteous people who suffer, while the evil people prosper. In this part of the Old Testament prophets arise to foretell of a day when the world would be put to right.

Until that day the job of the believer is to wait by holding firm and maintaining one's identity while trying to avoid being noticed by the powerful authorities of the nation to which you have been exiled - Babylon.

Then, the nation of Israel was restored to its land, and it is then that the Wisdom literature begins to form part of the Old Testament story. In these books, such as Ecclesiastes, Job and Proverbs the world is portrayed as an unpredictable place: sometimes the righteous prosper, sometimes they don't. In these pages of the Old Testament God isn't obviously present and neither blesses nor punishes. The job of the believer is not to follow the rules, or keep his or her head down, but instead to find a way to negotiate the world's tensions, and to interrogate its ambiguities.

If you read the books of Ecclesiastes, Job, and Proverbs you'll discover that God is not present. In these three books of the Old Testament God appears only once. Neither is there any law code in these books offering a road to salvation. There are no prophets promising a better future. There are only questions, suggestions, and reflections on how people might try living in the world.

The verses we read this morning are your invitation to interact with this Wisdom tradition. They describe Wisdom as something that is free - you don't have to pay for it, or make a sacrifice in the temple. They describe Wisdom as a banquet, a

¹ Proverbs 9: 1 - 6

banquet that is fabulous and fun (there's spiced wine!), and they describe Wisdom as something feminine, rather than the traditional masculine nature of God. Femininity in the Old Testament means nurturing.

And, this feminine characteristic also highlights the extent to which Wisdom is subversive of the Old Testament: no Law; no prophets; by gender, female. In stark contrast to how we think of wisdom in our world - an expensive, self-help, chore the biblical presentation of wisdom is of something that is free, fun, nurturing, and subversive.

The reason that the wisdom of our world today is the way it is: you have to pay for it; acquiring it is a chore; and you are promised a fulfilling reward at the end, is because today's wisdom is not subversive, but conforms to the way we have always thought about education from when we were at school.

We have come to expect that the more you pay, the better the education you get. We have come to expect that learning rarely comes easy, that school is often a slog, a chore, or at least hard work when you study for all those Highers. And, of course, we have come to believe that the reason our children go to school is for the rewards promised at the end, for those who pay the most and work the hardest: university, a good job, and plenty of money.

Over the past few months there has been much written about the Scottish Governments approach to school education, particularly in the early years, which is intended to narrow the attainment gap between rich and poor. Central to that approach is a policy of national standardised tests for literacy and numeracy from Primary one.

Supported by a great deal of evidence from around the world, many teachers have criticised this policy of standardised tests in general, and for Primary 1s in particular. Foremost in the campaign against this policy is an organisation called Play Scotland. Play Scotland's opposition is based on the belief that five-year olds cant be standardised before the age of about seven; until then children are still developing physically, emotionally, socially, and cognitively.

Consequently, those who believe that testing is wrong believe that the best way children learn, particularly in the early years, is by playing. There is a lot of evidence to support this theory; learning through playing is better than learning through testing.

We know what a test is, but what is play? Research shows that there are four things that often make up play. Play can always be free; a child will immediately learn to play with just about anything, a stone becomes a car, a stick a sword. Play is always fun, often fabulous fun, a banquet of the imagination. Play is nurturing; rather than putting children under pressure to sit a test, playing helps to develop all the cognitive and social skills that children will need in later life as adults.

And, playing is always, always subversive. Try imposing rules on a child's game, and immediately the children will subvert those rules; there's no better way to learn how something works, than by understanding how something doesn't work.

In the first book of Corinthians Paul describes Jesus as the incarnate wisdom of God. No wonder. Jesus does all things that are expected of Wisdom: he liked a glass of wine; he subverted the rules; he nurtured through love; and this graceful love was free. Jesus offers no hard and fast law, but rather asks us to negotiate the world's tensions, and to interrogate its ambiguities.

This week why not be wise, and learn how to feed on the bread of life, which came down from heaven and which is not like the bread our fathers ate. To do that, as it is the start of the school term, I'm going to give you some homework. This week, encounter wisdom by playing; at some point this week, play. If you can't think of how you might play, well there is your challenge. Discover a way to play, and experience the nurturing, subversive, free fun from which you will learn more about the world than any biblical text I might give you, or law that might be imposed on you.

Now to the one who can keep you from falling and set you in the presence of his glory, jubilant and above reproach, to the only God our saviour, be glory and majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all time, now, and for evermore. Amen.