

Feasting on Wisdom – Trinity 12 2018

Proverbs 9 vv 1-6 p642, Ephesians 5 vv 15-21 p1176, John 6 vv 51-58 p1071

The Book of Proverbs is described as Wisdom Literature. Wisdom literature in the Bible was probably primarily addressed to young men making their way in the world and more generally to a wider public, including, of course, us here today. Today's reading from Proverbs portrays Wisdom as a woman inviting our young man into her home for a good meal of prudence and common sense. The contrast is with the temptation the young man might feel to be drawn by lust into destructive relationships with young women who do not have his best interests at heart. In the same way, Proverbs also urges the young man not to join other young men in foolish or criminal behaviour, but rather to pay attention to the wise.

Some of you have been responsible for the upbringing of boys and young men. I was a young man once myself. So we know what we are talking about. We've just had the A level results and GCSEs will be coming out soon. Teachers and parents will have been encouraging their teenagers to study hard. In the Wisdom literature, there is a lot of good advice, many things to learn. Above all is the Wisdom of God. God creates everything there is in His infinite wisdom. A successful human life is one lived in accordance with His Word.

7 The law of the Lord is an undefiled law, converting the soul : the testimony of the Lord is sure, and giveth wisdom unto the simple.

8 The statutes of the Lord are right, and rejoice the heart : the commandment of the Lord is pure, and giveth light unto the eyes.

9 The fear of the Lord is clean, and endureth for ever : the judgements of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether.

10 More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold : sweeter also than honey, and the honey-comb.

11 Moreover, by them is thy servant taught : and in keeping of them there is great reward.

Psalm 19. *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.* Psalm 111. So, study the Word of God above all things.

Biblical wisdom, however, knows that all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy. *Of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh.* That's Ecclesiastes 12¹². Don't study too hard and don't make your teenager work too hard either.

Much as the Bible values learning and knowledge, it is clear that there will always be things which are beyond us. Not only in matters of faith and philosophy and ethics, but in every area of human endeavour there is always more. The more you find out, the more you realise there is still to discover. Great as they are, the Mona Lisa is not the last word in art nor are the Brandenburg Concertos the end of music. There is always more. Towards the end of the C19, it looked as if physics and chemistry had nearly cracked it. Almost everything was explicable. And then they discovered radioactivity, sub-atomic particles, the incredible immensity of space, quantum theory and relativity. You could say that Science began again in the years before the First World War. There is always more and it is good to inspire curiosity in young people, but also awe in the face of the sheer wonder of everything that is. By all means encourage your teenager in whatever field he or she is interested: academic work, science, art, music, drama. Pursue your own interests. Whenever we learn more about God's creation, we are learning something more of the glory of God. When we make something ourselves, from a great work of art to an apple pie or a car, we are co-creating

with God. When we work at something worthwhile, anything worthwhile, we are working with God.

But what else might parents have been thinking about when they tried to do their best for their sons and daughters? I expect many parents have waved their teenagers off for the evening with warnings like the one S Paul gives us in today's epistle: *Be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess.* There are several warnings against drinking too much in the Wisdom Literature, but that's not to say that we can't have fun, enjoying ourselves sensibly with a drink. Psalm 104. *14 He bringeth forth grass for the cattle : and green herb for the service of men; 15 That he may bring food out of the earth, and wine that maketh glad the heart of man : and oil to make him a cheerful countenance, and bread to strengthen man's heart.* God gives us these gifts to enjoy. Jesus turned over 100 gallons of water into wine at the wedding feast at Cana and they'd already drunk all the wine the family had laid in for the occasion. God takes pleasure in His Creation and it is His Will that we should do so too.

When S Paul writes *Be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess,* he adds, *but be filled with the Spirit.* He doesn't mean gin or rum. The Spirit he means is the Holy Spirit. I am quite sure that the reason we hear of so many young people going badly wrong in life, losing their way, suffering from depression, is that they don't know the Holy Spirit. There are many good things in this world which God has given us to enjoy. That's why Paul goes on, *giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.* None of these things can finally satisfy us however. As Augustine says, our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God. Trying to find yourself in material things, you are bound to fail, and may well fall into some seriously destructive behaviours, as indeed the young S Augustine did.

What else might parents or teachers want to encourage in young people as they are growing up? I'm sure a lot of us would say physical fitness. We try to keep youngsters healthy. We like to encourage them in sport and athletic activities. The Bible doesn't say too much about this. The only game I can think of in the Bible is a mock battle in II Samuel 2. Tragically that turned into a real fight and there was considerable loss of life. In the New Testament, S Paul writes, *For bodily exercise profiteth little.* The other day, I met in a young man in Cuxton churchyard. He'd been reading the gravestones and remarked, *We don't have long on this earth do we?* I quoted Psalm 90 back to him, *The days of our age are threescore years and ten; and though men be so strong that they come to fourscore years : yet is their strength then but labour and sorrow; so soon passeth it away, and we are gone.* Three score and ten, I told him, gives me rather fewer than seven years to go. The same psalm goes on, *So teach us to number our days : that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.* However fit we are, however much we exercise, however careful about our diet, however skilful our doctors, we shall all die and we shall all give account for our lives before the Judgment Seat of God. I would indeed encourage young people (and old people) to try to stay healthy and to enjoy sport if that's their thing, but it cannot be the be all and end all. Health and beauty are not the reason we are here. We eat and drink and try to keep healthy in order to live. We don't live in order to eat, drink and exercise.

On the radio this week, I heard some A level students talking about their careers and what they might hope to earn. That was a big consideration if they were going to incur huge debts by going to university. The biblical Wisdom literature has an interesting perspective on wealth. Proverbs 30^{8&9}: *Remove far from me vanity and lies: give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me. Lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, Who is the LORD? or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain.* It is hard to be virtuous if you are very poor or very rich. Nobody has the ambition to be very poor (or hardly anybody anyway, a few might for religious reasons) but perhaps too many want to be rich. It won't bring you fulfilment and it will lead you into all kinds of temptation. *A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches, and loving favour rather than silver and gold.* That's Proverbs again. It's better to deserve respect than to be rich. I wonder if some of these very wealthy men who pay their workers a pittance and raid their pension funds ever think of these truths. *A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches, and loving favour rather than silver and gold.* And, of course, as everybody knows,¹³ *Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding.*¹⁴ *For the merchandise of it is better than the merchandise of silver, and the gain thereof than fine gold.*¹⁵ *She is more precious than rubies: and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her.*¹⁶ *Length of days is in her right hand; and in her left hand riches and honour.*¹⁷ *Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace.* That's Proverbs 3. Wisdom and understanding are worth more than silver or gold or rubies. There's a worthwhile lesson for the young man or woman starting out in life. Will they hear it at school or on social media or at home? Will they hear it in Church?

So finally, we are what we eat. Wisdom invites us to her table. *Come, she says, Eat of my bread, and drink of the wine which I have mingled.* St Paul refers to Jesus as *the power of God and the wisdom of God.* Jesus reveals Himself to us as the Bread of life. You are what you eat. If you don't mind, and please remain seated for this, I'll repeat today's Gospel reading in the light of what we have just heard.

⁶¹ *I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.*

⁵² *The Jews therefore strove among themselves, saying, How can this man give us his flesh to eat?*

⁵³ *Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.*

⁵⁴ *Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day.*

⁵⁵ *For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed.*

⁵⁶ *He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him.*

⁵⁷ *As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me.*

⁵⁸ *This is that bread which came down from heaven: not as your fathers did eat manna, and are dead: he that eateth of this bread shall live for ever.*