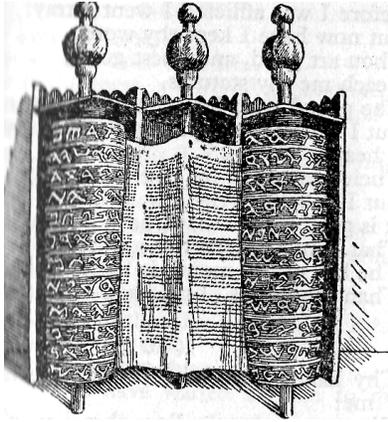


More Precious than Rubies



Bible Notes April - June 2009

50p

April 1st

Proverbs 1 v1

Is it appropriate to start a study of wisdom on April Fool's Day?

According to the psalm, *the fool hath said in his heart, There is no God*, and, according to St Paul, Christ is both the wisdom and power of God. Worth pondering. Atheism is folly. Wisdom is Christ. The wise man builds his house upon the rock, but the foolish man builds his on the sand.

Quite a lot of the Old Testament is described as wisdom literature. Think of it as written for young men hoping to be promoted at court, entering a profession or studying to become a skilled artisan. Think of it as thoughtful and intelligent people pondering on the nature of God, the Universe and everything. These are the people and this is the subject we shall be dealing with this quarter.

Scholars are not completely agreed as to which parts of the Old Testament are properly classified as wisdom literature, but the Book of Proverbs is the obvious place to start. King Solomon is the OT's quintessential wise man and thought of as the fount of much of its wisdom. Most scholars don't believe that we have to think of Solomon as the author of all these Proverbs, any more than John Wisden wrote everything you read in the Cricketers' Almanac. Probably, the collection was updated, modified and brought up to date over a long period.

April 2nd

Proverbs 1 vv 2-6

We sometimes misinterpret what Jesus says about the desirability of becoming like children. We are tempted to take it as meaning that we just have to accept things unthinkingly, that thought is unnecessary and perhaps even dangerous. The only time I have ever walked out of a Christian address was when the young woman giving it told her mainly young audience that when she became a Christian she gave up using her brain and relied entirely on her emotions. Children are curious. They are inquisitive. They want to learn. That is how they grow up! If we are wise, we will use our God-given brains to deepen our understanding of Who God is and what we should be.

April 3rd

Proverbs 1 v7

Some people try to portray faith as something for children and adults who have failed to grow up. Scientists and sophisticated intellectuals are, of course, it is alleged, atheists or at least agnostics, whereas religious people are foolish people, who rely on God as a crutch, tend to be stupid bigots on questions of morality and occasionally erupt into fanaticism and violence when they feel threatened. Nothing could be further from the truth. *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.* It is the knowledge of God that makes scientific sense of the natural universe, that gives a moral sense, and in which inhere ideas like truth and beauty which inspire us to live to an end.

Why *the fear of the LORD*? It is one of those traditional religious phrases with which we are no longer comfortable. Our God is more all-matey than almighty and we are doing Him something of a favour if we take the trouble to worship Him and put ourselves out to keep His commandments. I was going to say that the reality of God is something different from that, but what I ought to say is that God is reality and if you don't get real, you ought to be afraid. You can't base your life on a delusion.

April 4th

Proverbs 1 vv 8&9

The Bible is very strong on family. It is our families that care for us and our families that provide our moral framework. We are to listen to our fathers and our mothers. (The Bible does respect mothers as well as fathers, despite what the feminists would have you believe!) We are to respect older people – not treat them as nuisances when their increasing frailty ties us down to looking after them. I personally am worried by the way modern society breaks down the traditional family. People share their lives as though they were husband and wife but fail to make the permanent commitment of marriage. Children are increasingly looked after by schools, child minders and other professionals, rather than by their own parents. A flexible labour force is expected to abandon home, family and friends to travel even abroad to find work. Governments are ever more ready to intervene in our homes. And where is the love in any of it?

April 5th

Proverbs 1 vv 10-16

Peer pressure. Isn't it a powerful force? It's what lies behind pester power. Sweet, toy and clothes manufacturers can rely on children to pester their parents into buying *what everybody else has got*. When we're older, we fall for it ourselves. We want to belong. We want to feel part of the group. Many of our present problems are because people borrowed money they couldn't afford to buy goods they didn't need because they wanted to be the same as everybody else.

Government, banks and other major commercial enterprises exploited this herd mentality. So we damaged the environment by our excessive consumption, added to the hardship of the truly poor by our selfish greed, and brought down the banking system by our irresponsible borrowing. We need to belong, to be the same as everybody else and we behave even more irresponsibly in crowds than we do when we are on our own.

One of my old school friends told me recently how 30 years ago he was pressured by the gang to go out Paki bashing. Thankfully he declined, but how many young (and old people) do get sucked in because they have to belong!

April 6th

Proverbs 1 vv 17-19

People used to trap wild birds for food. We don't do that any more and in fact it is illegal in this country. But people in the past would have known what Proverbs is talking about. When you set a bird trap, you can't let the birds see you set it. Even the bird-brained don't fall into traps they can see being set. But people do! We all do things without considering the consequences. And gain is one of the best kinds of bait to catch a human being. We gamble even though we know that the odds always favour the bookie. We invest in speculative investments. Some of us even steal and some of us are prepared to rob with violence. And yet we know that investments which look too good to be true usually are. We know that stealing is often as hard work as earning. We know that another human being will suffer if we rob him. We know that the state will punish us if we are caught. And we ought to know that God will punish us whatever!

April 7th

Proverbs 1 vv 20-23

In some parts of town, there are ladies who will try to attract men both by their appearance and by what they say. They hope to profit thereby. Money changes hands. Respect disappears. Sex is devalued. Diseases are spread. In the long run, the transaction is good neither for the punter nor for the prostitute nor for society which is properly built on fidelity, family and mutual respect.

Boldly, Proverbs pictures Wisdom as an altogether more virtuous woman who uses her more certain and enduring charms to lure men to live good and useful lives.

Remembering that much of wisdom literature comes from schools designed for teenagers and young men, it is not surprising that it is necessary to counter the lusts of the flesh with the promise of wisdom. Dare we do the same? Dare we tell young people that there is a better way than casual sex, lack of commitment and general selfishness? Or do we think we have to be “relevant” and dumb down our message so that we attempt to impart wisdom without challenging the mores of a foolish (i.e. godless) society?

April 8th

Proverbs 1 vv 24-33

The Church doesn't promote celibacy, chastity and marriage in order to spoil people's fun. We don't warn against consumerism and materialism because we don't like people to be happy. We don't invite them to come to church because we want them to be bored. We don't ask people to question the values of the world we live in because we want to make their lives harder.

As Christians, we know God in Jesus Christ. We know what matters. We know the secret of living a fulfilled life and we know the consequences of sin. It is for this reason that we preach Jesus, that we urge people to give their lives to Him, to love Him and to keep His commandments.

April 9th

Proverbs 2 vv 1-9

He preserveth the way of his saints.

So where would you look for wisdom? I think any study is potentially beneficial. This is God's world. So whatever you can find out about the world – its history, geography, biology, whatever – is worth knowing. Neither is it just head knowledge. Things that move our hearts like music and art are all part of it. So is the knowledge of other people. Everyone is a child of God. So to know anyone else is to know something of God. There is also the knowledge of God we obtain by reading the Bible and attending to the teaching of the Church. And there is also the personal knowledge of God which we might obtain by prayer and meditation and participation in the Sacraments. All these things contribute towards wisdom and tend towards the fear of the LORD.

Now we are all different and some of us will find different ways of approaching God more or less congenial. We will receive different insights depending on the people we are and we will find them more or less useful depending on our own personalities. If we believe that we have something of an insight into God, something of true wisdom, we must measure that supposed insight against the figure of Jesus – the Word made flesh.

The saints are the righteous ones. God is righteous and we are righteous because we are found in Him, because we partake of His Wisdom, Which is Jesus Christ.

April 10th

Proverbs 2 vv 10-22

When wisdom entereth into thine heart.

The ten commandments are written on two brass plaques stuck on the wall at the back of St Michael's church and a fat lot of good they are. They are too high up and written in too fancy a script to read easily, but even, if you could read them, they would still be no use up there and out there. It's not that you know what the Word of God says that is important. What matters is that the Word of God is incarnate in your heart. Then follow all these blessings of protection from harm and temptation.

April 11th

Proverbs 3 vv 1 & 2

Who is the speaker in these verses? Who is referring to the law as *my law* and the commandments as *my commandments*? Is it Solomon or some other human parent or teacher? Or is it God? Even if it is a human being giving this advice, I am sure that the law and the commandments which are meant are God's. It is living by God's Law that makes us the people we are meant to be. It is only if we live by God's Law that we fulfil our purpose in life. And the Law of God is love and this love ought to fill our innermost being – our heart.

April 12th

Proverbs 3 vv 3&4

The book of Daniel might be a wisdom book and the story of Daniel might be a wisdom story. Daniel was a young man growing up in the court of King Nebuchadnezzar and learning to be a courtier and a minister. I have just been talking to a group of school children about Daniel. They were thinking about goals in life. It was a great opportunity for Daniel (as a member of a subject race) to have been brought up in the king's court and given a royal education. Daniel might look forward to power, wealth, fame and fortune. But he keeps on blowing it. While he does rise to high office, he always puts his God before his king, his faith before his fortune, mercy and truth before ambition and personal advancement. And that is true wisdom and those a goals really worth pursuing.

April 13th

Proverbs 3 vv 5&6

Act first and pray later. Decide what to do and then ask God's blessing on what you've decided. We like to be in control of our own lives. We think we know where we are going and what we should be doing. We only talk to God when we've already decided or when everything is falling to pieces around us.

Actually it would be far, far better to seek the guidance of God before embarking on a course of action than afterwards. Pray first and then act. Ask for guidance and decide in the light of what God is telling you through His written Word and the life-giving Holy Spirit active in the world today.

April 14th

Proverbs 3 vv 7-10

I hope you don't mind my quoting a recent sermon on the importance of consecrating the firstfruits, the beginning of the Harvest, to God. I think it shows more faith than Harvest Home. At Harvest Home, you know what you've got and how much you can spare to give away to the Church or to the poor. At Firstfruits, you give in faith. You offer to God the firstfruits of what you have. There might not be any more. If there are terrible storms, the firstfruits might turn out to be the last fruits. When you give your firstfruits to God, you give in faith. You trust God not to let you down.

Some people don't mind giving God their last fruits – the money they've got left when they've bought everything they need or want and put some away for a rainy day; the time they've got left when they've done everything else they want to do; the things they don't need for themselves – but giving in faith is letting God have the first choice, putting Him first in the allocation of your time, your money and your talents. People who live like that discover that they are strangely blessed. Their lives are based on faith in the omnipotent Deity, by Whose Wisdom Heaven and earth are sustained.

April 15th

Proverbs 3 vv 11 & 12

Things don't always go right! Our lives feel like a mess. Yet we think we've done all the right things. We've tried to be good. We've prayed. So why is God letting us encounter difficulties? We've all grown up in a society in which showing love for someone is interpreted as giving them what they want, parents are afraid to say *No*, there's a pill for every ill. We don't think we ought to suffer or to have any of our reasonable wants unsatisfied, ever to be thwarted. If things don't go our way, we think, either there is no God or He isn't our loving heavenly Father. But that is foolish. God knows infinitely more than we do. He does love us and He does know what is truly in our best interests. If things get difficult for us, we shouldn't give up our faith in God. That is just the time to cling on to Him, trusting Him that He knows what He is doing in our lives for our good and for the good of other people.

April 16th

Proverbs 3 vv 13-18

And there's another country, I've heard of long ago,
Most dear to them that love her, most great to them that know;
We may not count her armies, we may not see her King;
Her fortress is a faithful heart, her pride is suffering;
And soul by soul and silently, her shining bounds increase,
And her ways are ways of gentleness and all her paths are peace.

Proverbs is practical wisdom for life in the every day world. Living in the light of eternity is practical wisdom for life in the every day world.

April 17th

Proverbs 3 vv 19 & 20

Wisdom is of the very nature of God. Heaven and earth exist by the wisdom of God. Scientists are investigating the Mind of God whether they know it or not. Scientific laws are God's laws no less than the Ten Commandments. When we study the wisdom of God, we are not just examining what we might call the religious part of our lives. God is all-encompassing. There is no separate religious compartment in our lives. Christ is all in all.

April 18th

Proverbs 3 vv 21-26

When I was at college, there was a tendency to downplay the religious aspects of *Proverbs*. This book was secular guidance for a young man starting out in the secular world – business or politics, perhaps. Such a young man would need certain basic qualities such as diligence, honesty, punctuality, courtesy, etc., but nothing specifically religious. In the C21 we might be very inclined to think like this. Certain secular values such as diligence, honesty, punctuality, courtesy, etc. are universally commendable, the sort of thing we inculcate into our children in state schools, but religion is something to be confined within the home, the family and perhaps the faith community. People's religious beliefs, we might argue, ought not to impinge on the way they do their job, especially if they are politicians or teachers or in any other profession where values matter. This is not, however, the biblical view and I don't see how it can be if we believe in an Almighty God. God is Lord of every aspect of our lives and His Law of love runs through everything. Whatever we do, we ought to undertake prayerfully, how

ever we try to live, it ought to be according to His Law, wherever we look for strength, guidance and support, we look to God. There can be no religiously neutral way of looking at the way we do our job or anything else for that matter. And, if the demands of the secular world clash with our duty to God, we really only have one choice.

April 19th

Proverbs 3 vv 27–32

I smile when I read passages like this. It is so obvious that it makes sense to do what they recommend, yet we are so stupid that we often don't do it. Do your duty. Pay your debts. Act promptly. Don't procrastinate. Don't make trouble. Don't start a fight. Don't feel envious of people who've got more than you because they're more ruthless than you are. It's what they vulgarly call a *no brainer*, but, even given that this common sense has been circulated in writing for well over 2,000 years, people still behave foolishly. They bizarrely think it smarter to mock "bible bashers" than to read the Bible and act on the wise precepts which would save them and the rest of the world so much trouble.

April 20th

Proverbs 3 vv 33-35

I mentioned that a C21 vice is to try to make a distinction between the religious and the secular – to suggest that there is secular area of life (the public realm of politics, business, sport, entertainment, etc.) and another (maybe smaller and less significant) religious segment (a private realm of your own personal beliefs, what you do in your own home, and the life of your church, mosque or synagogue). I have said that this is impossible if we believe in Almighty God because He is in all things and all things exist in Him.

In the same way, for the last couple of hundred years, we have exaggerated the distinction between the natural and the supernatural. We attempt to describe the natural world with our scientific theories and to predict its behaviour with scientific laws. The supernatural is then what is left after Science, inexplicable and (some people think) so unlikely as to be effectively impossible. It would be wiser to recognise that the natural and the supernatural are a unity under God and that God's plans for human beings work out in both.

April 21st

Proverbs 4 vv 1-13

The way to live well is to live wisely. It is taken for granted here that wisdom is passed down the generations. We have a responsibility to pass our faith on to our children. We have a responsibility to respect our elders and to learn from them.

It is so easy for the elderly to get sidelined. As bodies grow frailer, or older people are left behind by rapid advances in technology, or simply left behind as we move far from home in search of a better job or a warmer place to retire in, they may be seen more as a nuisance and a responsibility than as a source of wisdom. But they have all that experience and all that love. We can even learn from their mistakes.

Similarly, we can feel sidelined. We may not feel confident in passing on our values to a younger generation which is much more technically savvy than we are and which is encouraged to rebel so that big business can grow fat on teenage fashions, a generation which picks up its values from Channel 4 rather than the Bible. The temptation is to give up or at least to dumb down in an effort to be “relevant”. We should, however, pass on what we believe in. They can learn from our mistakes too.

Slavishly following tradition and unquestioning acceptance of what previous generations have said is stultifying. But it would be equally stupid to attempt to live without the wisdom discovered and passed on by previous generations. Tradition is living.

April 22nd

Proverbs 4 vv 14-26

What was it those posters on the London buses said? *There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.* The basic idea is that religious belief puts all kinds of restrictions on your life, that faith makes you miserable in this life, but that it might be worth it if you eventually get to Heaven. If you don't believe in God, Heaven or Hell, you'll have a happier life in the here and now. Christians are supposed to believe that we are happier on earth as well as in Heaven if we live in accordance with the Wisdom of God. Which do you believe? Can you convince other people to live the way you do by your words or by your actions?

April 23rd

Proverbs 5 vv 1-14

Richard Dawkins was one of the prime movers in having that slogan put on the buses. He is quite a militant atheist and he believes that humanity is explained solely and sufficiently by the Theory of Evolution. It just happened that the universe came into existence and spawned a planet in which life would develop. Increasingly complex molecules segued into living things. Living things evolved through a combination of chance mutation and the survival of the fittest. And here we are. Such an account of the origins of humanity gives us no ultimate purpose. The values we ascribe to ourselves and our actions are our own human values. Our desires and appetites reflect our evolutionary inheritance and really there is essentially no more to it than that. While society may find it necessary (perhaps for evolutionary reasons) to curb lust, greed and violence and to promote what was traditionally called virtue, neither goodness nor badness has any meaning other than the meaning we ascribe to it. Nor has human life any essential purpose except to exist and to reproduce.

Conversely, we Christians believe that however we are made, we are made for the glory of God. Human beings who do not love God are lacking in what is essential to their humanity. They therefore pursue *drugs and sex and rock and roll*, not to mention celebrity status, power, money and consumer goods. All these things, however, miss the point. They can't satisfy. What is missing in the life of the sex maniac, the addict or the businessman who can see no farther than the bottom line is God.

April 24th

Proverbs 5 vv 15-23

If you can remember the Ten Commandments, which ones of them still matter? You probably aren't likely to worship a graven image, but would it be politically correct to criticize those who do? The Lord's Name is a relatively minor swearword even for many Christians. Not many people remember the Sabbath any more. We've commented on our failure to honour parents. I think we are encouraged to covet. That is what advertisements are for. That only leaves false witness, stealing, murder and adultery. I don't honestly think people any longer have much respect for the truth. From government spokesman down to

common criminals, people tell us what it suits them for us to believe, not what is honestly true. I suppose we still disapprove of stealing and killing. But what about adultery? Is adultery still regarded as a serious sin or do we tacitly accept that it is worse to carry on in a loveless marriage than to look for happiness with someone else? If we don't believe in the Ten Commandments any more, where does our morality come from, but, if we do believe in them, why don't we fearlessly stand up for them?

April 25th

Proverbs 6 vv 1-5

What problems debt causes! In this case the risk lies in taking responsibility for a friend's debts, acting as his guarantor. If he defaults, you will have to pay. If you cannot pay, you will be in serious trouble. Either way, you may find that you are friends no longer.

In the Old Testament, it is forbidden to take interest on a debt. If a poor man gives you something important as a pledge of repayment like his only blanket, you can't keep it over night even if he can't pay. If you owe someone for wages or services, you pay at once. Debts that cannot be repaid are forgiven in the Year of the Jubilee (the 50th year). Debt is dangerous. Creditor/debtor relationships impair human relations. Debts that cannot be paid may plunge both debtor and creditor into poverty. Interest can be a temptation to greed on the one side and the road to ruin on the other. Debt is dangerous and the Bible handles it delicately. Jesus is even more radical. He says don't lend to those who can repay, but lend to the poor who cannot. Effectively the loan is a gift to a person worse off than yourself!

Our modern society is barely conceivable without credit. Most people buy their houses with a mortgage. Businesses are financed on loans. So is higher education. Yet we are seeing the results of cynical ruthlessness only too clearly. People take out loans they can't repay. Creditors use harsh tactics to get their money back. Big businesses cynically keep small businesses waiting for payments. It seems that nobody trusts anybody anymore. We need a new financial system based on biblical values such as honesty, moderation and compassion.

April 26th

Proverbs 6 vv 6-11

These verses might ring faint bells with you. In years gone by the Book of Proverbs was much more fashionable than it is now and people liked quoting (and writing poetry) about the ant and the sluggard. We hardly ever read *Proverbs* nowadays. Perhaps it is a good thing we are doing so now. The whole of the Bible is the Word of God, not just the bits which we happen like or are fashionable in our own generation.

Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience, and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

April 27th

Proverbs 6 vv 12-15

It is not so much what you do as what you are. Do you do bad things or are you a bad person? Do you do good things or are you a good person? You can't separate your deeds from your character. Jesus says that we know people by their fruits. We know what people are by what they do. A good person is one who loves the LORD his God with all his heart, soul, mind and strength. The person who sincerely loves God, inevitably loves his neighbour. If we love we keep the commandments.

Of course it is true that, even if we are Christians, we lapse. We fail to act well and we have to confess the sin and receive God's absolution. We shall not love perfectly till we get to Heaven. But there are on earth the means of grace – prayer, the Bible, Holy Communion, the fellowship of the Church, etc. – to make us better people. If we neglect these, it is our own fault that we don't improve.

Conversely a bad person may act good in order to deceive, but he can't keep it up.

April 28th

Proverbs 6 vv 16-19

This form in verse 16 “x things, yea (x+1) things” is not uncommon in wisdom literature. It is though that the (x + 1)th thing (in this case the 7th) is the one the writer really wants to draw attention to. So all those first six things are bad and therefore an abomination unto the LORD, but the 7th is the worst – to sow discord among brethren. We are brothers and sisters in the Church. Jesus prayed that we might be one. It is a fearful thing to create discord in the Church.

April 29th

Proverbs 6 vv 20-23

The commandment is a lamp; law (Torah) is a light. It is the way of life. This is very Deuteronomy. We are to know God’s Word so well that it becomes part of us. So that we live in God’s Law and God’s Law lives in us. With God’s Law inside us, we carry our own torch. We can find the Way. We avoid the pitfalls. We walk in the Way of Life. Jesus is the incarnation of the Way and the Life. It is not too much to say that He is the incarnation of God’s Torah of Love – *that we may evermore dwell in him and he in us.*

April 30th

Proverbs 6 vv 24-35

A few days ago we considered which of the Ten Commandments really matter today. (I should say all of them and that is why I try not to work or shop on a Sunday or swear or practise economy with the truth or covet other peoples’ possessions or lifestyles as well as trying to avoid murder, theft and adultery. A lot of people probably regard me as odd for taking this stand and believe that most of the Ten Commandments are out of date, that it is unrealistic to try to live by them, and that it puts young people off coming to Church if I ask them to measure themselves by God’s Law rather than by the opinions of their contemporaries.)

It is interesting that here *Proverbs* regards adultery as worse than stealing. You can make excuses for a poor man who steals because he is desperate. There is no excuse for adultery! Our generation seems to take it for granted that a sexual relationship with someone you love is a right and that therefore it is wrong to deny someone the happiness of a pre- or extramarital relationship or, if they are so inclined, a homosexual, transsexual or any other sort of relationship. To insist on

celibacy is thought to be unreasonable. But I wonder if this desperate need for sex arises because people are lacking a loving relationship with God?

May 1st

Proverbs 7 vv 1-27

This chapter works on two levels. Yes it is warning the young man against being led astray by the loose woman. Nothing but harm will come of harlotry or adultery. Sex is very close to being a sacrament, an outward and invisible sign of the inward and spiritual grace of married love, an action which effects what it signifies. Sex apart from marriage (by which I mean a relationship based on an irrevocable commitment to lifelong unconditional love) cheapens sex, demeans those who practise it and undermines the basis of family life. Sometimes people joke that enjoying sex without commitment when you can't get it within marriage is like enjoying sausages when you can't get steak. It's more like filling yourself up on cheap sausages so that you can no longer appreciate a good steak and runs the risk of food-poisoning.

This chapter is about more than sex, however. The harlot in this chapter is the personification of Folly. *The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God.* The fool does not live by God's Torah of Love. In other words, the fool is a sinner and *the wages of sin is death.*

May 2nd

Proverbs 8 vv 1-11

In contrast, Wisdom is personified as a virtuous woman. Wisdom longs to be loved. She reaches out to an unheeding humanity. It really ought to be so easy. We have common sense. We have consciences. We have the Bible. Most of us were well brought up by our parents and taught how to behave properly at school. Many of you reading this went to Sunday School and go to Church. Basically, we know how to act wisely – that we ought to love the LORD our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbours as ourselves. We know what sort of people we will be and how we will act if we obey those two commandments. If we keep the commandments, we really will live. Wisdom cries out to us for our love. Christ, the wisdom of God and the power of God, reaches out to us from the Cross. How can it be that our love is so weak?

May 3rd

Proverbs 8 vv 12-21

Wisdom is what kings and governors need. Wisdom is what engineers and scientists need. Teachers and parents need wisdom. So do bus drivers and street cleaners. Whoever we are, whatever we do, we need wisdom. Wisdom includes the practical skills and knowledge to get the job done. But it is much more than that. Wisdom is not only about how we do what we do, but why we do it. What is the purpose in our lives? To what end do we go out to work, bring up a family, make our gardens beautiful, keep fit, keep pets, whatever we do? What makes us the people we are. *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.* That is the essential part, to know God and to live our lives and do our work in that context.

May 4th

Proverbs 8 vv 22-31

This is an exciting ride. If wisdom is necessary to accomplish absolutely anything, then even God uses wisdom to create and sustain the universe. It follows that wisdom must exist before anything else. Wisdom has the primacy. You could say that God needs to create Wisdom before He creates anything else because He will use Wisdom to create the rest of creation. It is quite a thought that, when we employ Wisdom, as we must in whatever we do, we are using the same “tool” as God. We find wisdom in our relationship with God, in our fear and love of Him.

Now this chapter caused problems in the early Church. The early Church knew that Christ is the Wisdom of God. Christ, therefore, existed “before”¹ the Universe was created. Every Christian could agree on that point. God the Father created the Universe working with the Son and the Holy Spirit. If, however, you insist that this chapter’s references to wisdom apply literally to Jesus, it looks as if God made Jesus. He may have made Him “before” anything else, but He is still a created being – the most important of all created beings, but created none the less. This was the view of a man called Arius. Athanasius, on the other hand, insisted that this cannot be right. The Christian Gospel

¹ I put “before” in inverted commas because there was no time before the Universe was created. I mean that Christ has primacy over creation, not that He has been around longer!

depends on the fact that Jesus is both man and God. Now God is not created and therefore Jesus cannot be created. He is not the first and most important created being. He is One with the uncreated Being Who creates everything. Wisdom (like any other human word) is a metaphor for Christ, not a complete and literal description!

This is why we say in the Creed (on the insistence of S Athanasius)

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made.

May 5th

Proverbs 8 vv 32-36

Do you know what I mean by *Christian formation*? We become Christians, we are saved, when we put our trust in Jesus and are baptized in His Name. That is not, however, the end of the story. It is not a matter of being baptized, walking away, leading a perfectly ordinary and worldly life till we die and then going to Heaven. Eternal life is something which commences when we first put our trust in Jesus. We are called to glory here on earth. We hope to make spiritual progress – to grow in faith, to become more Christ like people while we are still on earth. We look for *Christian formation*. The Church seeks to form us all into more Christian Christians. I suppose I am fairly traditional in my approach to *Christian formation*. I look to weekly participation in Holy Communion – daily if possible, daily prayer, Bible study and meditation. That is half the reason why I say Morning & Evening Prayer daily in Church (complete with Bible readings), offer a daily celebration of the Eucharist in the parish and do my best to make sure that there is a Communion service in both parish churches every Sunday at a time when people are likely to be able to come. It is for my *Christian formation* and for yours if you choose to join me. (The other half of the reason is that I do these things in order to glorify God, but they are two halves of the same thing. It is in glorifying God that we become perfect human beings.) You might say that this vision of *Christian formation* is outmoded and impractical in the modern world, but what are you going to replace it with? It won't do just to give up on growing into our inheritance as the children of God.

May 6th

Ecclesiastes 1 v1

Having had a taste of Proverbs, we will now try a completely different sort of wisdom literature – the Book of Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes is really about the meaning of life. It is written from the perspective of King Solomon – though most modern scholars do not believe that he actually wrote it. The point is that Solomon had everything, exactly the things which people seem to aspire to today. He was rich. He was powerful. He dwelt in a splendid palace. He had wonderful clothes. He had a harem. He lived a long life. He was an international celebrity. If all those things brought fulfilment, Solomon's life was completely fulfilled. Yet he was empty and, as a wise man, he asked why life was so empty.

May 7th

Ecclesiastes 1 vv 2&3

People work so hard. They work long hours. They put huge amounts of effort into housework and decorating, gardening, personal fitness and beauty, and even going on holiday. All the labour saving devices we invent don't give us any more time to relax. They just give us more time to take on more work. I read recently that the average journey to work time is much the same now as it was 100 years ago – an hour. The invention of bikes and motor buses, the electrification of the railways, near universal car ownership, none of them have shortened the time it takes to get to work. People just live farther from the office!

But what is it all for? I am convinced that a lot of this activity is because people are so afraid to face their own thoughts. They cannot *Be still and know that I am God*.

May 8th

Ecclesiastes 1 vv 4-7

All this activity makes no real lasting change. In a way, it couldn't. Life would be impossible if days and nights didn't keep coming round, if the water which runs into the sea did not evaporate, form clouds and come down again as rain. Life will be impossible in the future if any generation of humans finally alters the nature of the earth by climate change or nuclear or biological warfare. So what's the point? All your activity, all the activity in nature, essentially change nothing.

May 9th

Ecclesiastes 1 v 8

The eye is not satisfied with seeing nor the ear with hearing.

If you seek satisfaction in the things you can see and hear and touch, the material world, you are never satisfied. These things cannot satisfy. So you work harder. Buy more things. Maybe get deeper into debt. What only can satisfy a human being is the love of God and yet we wriggle and writhe and struggle to avoid it. The Church calls this original sin. I suppose the paradigm is Sunday morning when thousands of people mill around in Bluewater seeking satisfaction in commerce and affecting to despise those of us who spend the Lord's Day celebrating His Life & Death & Resurrection.

May 10th

Ecclesiastes 1 vv 9-11

Nothing significant really changes and what we think of as our great achievements are soon forgotten. What is the point?

St Thomas Aquinas suggested five ways to "prove" the existence of God. They are not really proofs; they are reasons why it is rational to believe. One of these is the so called teleological argument. Telos (Greek τέλος) means "end". Things do have a conclusion, a purpose or point and that end is God.

May 11th

Ecclesiastes 1 vv 12-18

Solomon looks around him and he cannot see any purpose in nature. He looks at the struggles of the poor – people whose lives are *nasty, brutish and short*. Even with all his privileges, he cannot see the point of human existence. He finds no consolation in philosophy (the love of wisdom). Philosophy just underlines the pointlessness of everything. At this stage, he has yet to get to the true wisdom which is Christ.

May 12th

Ecclesiastes 2 vv 1-11

Getting there is not half the fun. Very often, it is all the fun. We do enjoy creating things, acquiring things. There is satisfaction in planting a garden, decorating a house, ascending the career ladder, even going to *Bluewater* and coming home with a boot stuffed with lovely things. The trouble is, when you have achieved your goal, you start to ask yourself whether it was worth it. The weeds will take over your garden

if you relax your vigilance. Your heirs will redecorate your house to their taste. Being foreman is not half so much fun as working to become foreman. The clothes it was such fun to buy and wear the first time soon languish at the back of the wardrobe. Solomon had every opportunity to prosper in the world's ways and it brought him no lasting pleasure.

*Solid joys and lasting treasure
None but Zion's children know.*

May 13th

Ecclesiastes 2 vv 12-17

Proverbs and much of the wisdom literature is about how much better it is to be a wise man than it is to be a fool. The wise man can expect reasonable prosperity and success whereas the fool is on the road to ruin. And yet, reasons Solomon, the wise man and the fool are both going the same way. They will both die and be soon forgotten. What is the point in the long run? We know (as presumably Solomon did not at least then) that Christ is not only the power and wisdom of God, but also the Resurrection and the Life. So the fruits of wisdom are eternal.

May 14th

Ecclesiastes 2 vv 18-26

You might work hard and wisely to establish a business, build a house, gain a kingdom even, but one day you will have to die. Or your efforts will be passed on to your heirs. They have not earned them. They may squander them entirely. American entrepreneurs speak of rags to riches to rags in three generations as one enterprising young man builds a business from nothing, only to have it frittered away by his children and grandchildren.

Maybe it is best not to worry too much about your legacy. Do your duty now as well as you are able. That will bring you the most satisfaction you can hope for in this life. God will guide and sustain the wise – those who fear Him – whereas the rebels are still on that road to ruin.

May 15th

Ecclesiastes 3 vv 1-8

This is so poetic someone ought to set it to music. Oh, they have! I wonder what they think it means? Can you say? *Put Solomon's message into your own words*, your literature teacher might have said. I wish I could put his message into my words. They are beautiful, haunting even, but what do they mean? You can read them as another expression of ultimate futility and you can read them as a statement that there is a natural order. Perhaps they mean both. The natural order is of great value within time and space, but of no ultimate significance except as seen in the context of eternity. Time and space need to be redeemed by the eternal Christ.

May 16th

Ecclesiastes 3 vv 9-15

I am afraid that I have probably lost some of you. That's partly because I am groping for the way myself. You might be saying to me, *Get your feet back on the ground. Just get on with the life you've got.* And I think Solomon is saying that here. God has given us our ordinary every day lives and we do just have to get on with them, living the best we can. God does care about every day things and we do have to account to Him for what we do with them. But all these things are within the mystery of the infinity of God and it is only in this infinite mystery that they find their true meaning. In other words, you won't understand your life until you are dead.

May 17th

Ecclesiastes 3 vv 16 & 17

You do sometimes get injustice exactly where there ought to be justice. Power corrupts. Governments may be corrupt. Courts may be corrupt. Local councils may be corrupt. Big business may be corrupt. But these are just the places where justice ought to be maintained. Those who will suffer most when injustice is at the heart of government are the poor and the weak – the very people who, according to the Bible, are God's special care. Ultimately, however, there is justice and tyrannical presidents, heartless judges, corrupt council officials and unscrupulous businessmen will all give account to God for what they have done.

May 18th

Ecclesiastes 3 vv 18-22

Plants use the energy in sunlight to convert the carbon dioxide in the air and water from the ground into sugars, starch and cellulose, which form most of their “bodies” and provide their energy. They also make use of other nutrients and minerals from the ground – notably nitrogen.

Animals eat plants and/or other animals. We eat plants and animals. So our bodies, our material selves, are formed of the same stuff as the earth is made of. We and animals and plants are of the dust of the earth.

Unlike the dust we are alive. We and the animals have breath or spirit². It is believed that, on death, the spirit of human beings ascends to God, whereas the life of animals returns to the ground, but how do we know that? Did Solomon know that? V21 can be translated as a question as if Solomon was not sure or as a statement, implying that he did. Genesis 2 v7 states *And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.* We are different from the animals, but not so different. We have to make the most of our lives on earth – though to make the most of your earthly life must be to live in the light of heaven.

May 19th

Ecclesiastes 4 vv 1-3

Don't you sometimes feel like this when you look at what is going on in places like Zimbabwe. Terrible things happen on earth which make us doubt the humanity of human beings and even question whether there is a God Who cares. We are not, however, helpless. We can all pray.

Most of us can give money and some of us can give time and talents.

Last week was Christian Aid Week and it is not too late to send a donation! Some of us may actually have positions of power or influence in agriculture or commerce or politics. We all have the vote and the right to make representations to our elected representatives. We are not helpless! We can make a difference.

May 20th

Ecclesiastes 4 vv 4-6

We're in difficult territory here. The experts I've looked up don't seem to be too sure what these verses mean. The sense seems to be that you are better off taking things quietly and enjoying the fruits of steady work rather than working yourself to a frazzle in order to gain wealth or

² The word for breath is the same as the word for spirit – ruah, רוח

power which you are too tired and tense to enjoy. It is commending moderation in work, not laziness. The fool is lazy and finishes up living *off his own flesh*, a metaphor perhaps for his capital or his relations or maybe literally his own fat!

May 21st

Ecclesiastes 4 vv 7 &8

Solomon says that he has seen a man working himself half to death to build up his business empire and he hasn't even got anyone to leave it to. What makes people keep driving themselves, building up and storing up far more than they can ever use? When a banker recently described £1,000,000 a year as a modest income, what did he think a substantial income would amount to? People seem to lose all sense of proportion. St Paul says, *I have learnt in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content*. St Paul was a wise man.

May 22nd

Ecclesiastes 4 vv 9-12

Behold, how good and joyful thing it is: brethren, to dwell together in unity! (Psalm 133 v1)

It's another one of those obvious things. We get on better if we work together. If we are friends we can support one another. I once read that, in the old pre-steam navy, it was calculated that ten men hauling on a rope together had twelve times the pull of just one man pulling alone. We work better as a team. And yet there are so many reasons why we won't pull together: egotism, personal ambition, distrust of one another. It is an aspect of original sin, that distortion of human nature which puts self before God and self before other people and, paradoxically, hurts self more than anything.

May 23rd

Ecclesiastes 4 vv 13-16

Better is a poor and wise child than an old and foolish king.

I wonder if this thought was the inspiration for the story of the Emperor's New Clothes. The message of much of this wisdom literature is that wisdom may well help you to become successful in this life, reasonably well off and a respected pillar of the community. But it is wisdom that matters. Better to be wise, poor and despised than an empty-headed celebrity.

May 24th

Ecclesiastes 5 vv 1-7

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

But it is easy to be foolish in religion. Attend worship humbly, ready to listen to God. Don't come making a great show of your piety or your charismatic gifts. Don't make extravagant promises you can't or won't keep. The first purpose of your worship is to honour God. The second is to build up your fellow worshippers. The third is to commend the faith to unbelievers. The fourth is to bring Christian values to bear on the problems of the world. The last is your own spiritual benefit.

May 25th

Ecclesiastes 5 vv 9-17

So where do we stand on wealth and power? We probably don't think that we are very rich or powerful. But we are probably richer than our parents were and richer than we were when we younger? When did your family first have a fridge or a car or central heating? We are probably richer than a lot of people in Britain today and certainly richer than millions of people overseas. We also have more power over our own lives at least than a lot of people do.

Do we honour, envy or aspire to be like the rich? Would we like to be a little bit richer than we are now? Ecclesiastes points out the pitfalls. If you do gain power, you are answerable to God for the way you use it. It isn't an opportunity to *feather your own nest* or to get your *snout in the trough*. The purpose of power is to serve the whole community and especially to protect the weak. Power and position are privileges not opportunities to promote your own concerns.

And then really what is the point of being rich? You might have 20 bedrooms, but you can still only sleep in one of them. You acquire a big house. Then you've got to pay cleaners and builders and decorators. Family and friends may take it for granted that you will sub them. If you eat and drink too much, you can't sleep. As head of ICI, you've got a lot more to worry about than his chauffeur.

Most important of all you can't take it with you! When I think of the time and effort people put into the material side of their lives and then reckon they have no time to devote to the things of eternity!

May 26th

Ecclesiastes 5 vv 18-20

They crucified Jesus. The early Church was a persecuted minority within the Roman Empire. Strangely enough, one of the selling points of early Christianity was that, if it was worth dying for, it might be worth living for. *The blood of the martyrs was the seed of the Church.* Eventually, however, Christianity became respectable and then it became a majority faith and, in due course, the official religion of the Roman Empire. You could be a Christian very comfortably. In fact, if you wanted to advance in society, it was a good move to call yourself a Christian. Inevitably, the Church compromised with the Empire and a minority religion, which had tended to despise wealth and power and embrace pacifism, morphed into the religious branch of a state based on wealth, power and military might. Some Christians rejoiced because being part of the establishment gave them the power to influence secular culture for good. Others despaired, believing that in compromising with the world, the Church had abandoned her faithfulness to Christ. Many of these became hermits or monks, withdrawing from the world and living in conditions of great austerity.

From those days, we have a legacy of thinking that authentic Christianity is best served by those who take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. In the Old Testament, this was not the case. Reasonable prosperity in this world was seen as a blessing from God – to be enjoyed and received with thanksgiving. There is very little in the Old Testament about the voluntary renunciation of the good things of this world in order to make spiritual progress. The problems associated with riches in the OT are the dangers of oppressing the poor or forgetting that you depend on the LORD for your life. If you remember the LORD and are fair and generous to the poor, there is no problem in wealth. What should be our attitude today to questions like the establishment of the Church, the pursuit of power and wealth by Christians, the enjoyment of worldly success, monastic vocations?

My own view is that establishment puts us in a good position to care for the nation, that some are called to be monks & nuns and that most of us can have an OT approach to wealth, remembering from Whom it comes and, therefore, acquiring it and using it honestly and generously.

May 27th

Ecclesiastes 6 vv 1-5

We might expect that talented people who work hard and honestly will be rewarded in this life. Very often, of course, they are. That is why we encourage school children to work hard and pass their exams. We also expect that if parents bring up their children well, they themselves will be respected by their children in old age. This is how things are supposed to work out. But life doesn't always work out like this. Good people are cut down in their prime. Good workers get laid off because of the stupidity or criminality of bankers and politicians. Kind parents are repaid with ingratitude and neglect. You can believe that all this shows that there is no justice, no purpose in life, that our lives are not in the hands of a loving and omnipotent Father or you can believe that God knows what He is doing and that He is looking after us how ever it may look to us in the here and now. If you believe the latter, you will keep praying and continue to try to live virtuously. If you believe the former, you will very likely despair and lose your moral compass.

May 28th

Ecclesiastes 6 vv 6-12

St Paul calls death the last enemy. Hebrews talks about human beings as being throughout their lives in bondage to the fear of death. Even animals struggle against dying or being killed. We wonder about the process of dying and what might await us on the other side, if anything. We are only too aware that we shall not leave much of a legacy on earth and most of us will be forgotten in a generation or two. Some of us research our genealogy. We may even have photos of great, great grandparents, but these names and cardboard pictures are not the living, vital people they represent. We do not actually know anyone who died before we were born. If we think like this, death really makes nonsense of our lives.

One of the things which supposedly commended Christianity to the Anglo-Saxons was that the Church claimed to be able tell us what happens to us when we die. The answer is that God judges us. If we accept Him, our sins are forgiven and we dwell with Him in perfect bliss throughout eternity. If we reject Him, our sins are retained and the wages of sin is death. It is only this certainty about the hereafter which makes sense of the here and now.

May 29th

Ecclesiastes 7 vv 1-6

These verses seem a bit gloomy. I mean; I enjoy a laugh and I expect you do. A sense of humour is a healthy thing. The problem is that some people hide from reality in entertainment – drugs and sex and rock and roll. You need to have a perspective, to keep a sense of proportion. We do really face real problems in life. We do face death and final judgment. Always live as ready to meet your Maker, but that does not mean refraining from enjoying yourself. I am sure that He is pleased to see us happy, unless we are one of those horrible people who can only be happy when we are up to mischief.

May 30th

Ecclesiastes 7 vv 7-22

This is all good prudent advice. Live life well but modestly. Don't look for trouble. See things through. Treat people fairly. Make allowances for other people. I like the advice in v10:

Say not thou, What is the cause that the former days were better than these?

I'm always thinking that the former days were better than these days. So are a lot of the people I talk to – especially Christian people. Ecclesiastes says it is not wise to ask that. The very fact that people were asking why their days were worse than earlier days 2,500 years ago shows that it is pointless to look back for some Golden Era and think we ought to return to it. When I was a naïve teenager, I remember saying to someone that it is pity we can't take the best bits from every era: the present, the Victorian, the Reformation, the Middle Ages, etc.. He said, "Who would decide which were the best bits?"

May 31st

Ecclesiastes 7 vv 23-29

Even from the point of view of Solomon, ultimate wisdom is unattainable for human beings. We can learn a lot. We can study. We can meditate. But, in the end, the more we know, the more we realise we don't know, the wiser we are, the more we recognise the limitations of our understanding. Any wisdom we can acquire helps us to live better, but there is a great deal more that we cannot know. Plato advocated philosophy – which means the love of wisdom. We human beings cannot be truly wise, though we can and should love wisdom. It is in the love of Christ that we plumb the depths of absolute wisdom.

June 1st

Ecclesiastes 8 vv 1-5

There was a very thought-provoking article in today's *Daily Express*. The theme was that there seems to be a growing hostility on the part of officialdom in this country to the Christian religion. This is very odd. We have an established Church and our Head of State is also Supreme Governor of the Church of England. Yet nurses get into trouble for offering to pray for their patients. School children are reprimanded for talking about their faith to other pupils. Christian symbols, such as crosses, are removed from public places. At least one hospital trust tried to have the Gideon Bibles removed from wards. On the other hand, it often seems that councils, schools, hospital trusts, etc., bend over backwards not to offend believers in any other religion and to provide them with opportunities to practise their faith.

When Sikhs responded to a play they considered offensive with violent demonstrations, the authorities had the play taken off, but when Christians write to the papers expressing hurt at the mockery of our religion in the media, the "intelligentsia" just sneer at us. It is tempting to think that, if we threw stones at theatres instead of writing pained letters to the *Daily Express*, council diversity offices might pay us more attention.

The question could arise as to when Christians ought to defy the secular state. Daniel carried on praying openly to God when King Darius forbade him to do so. There does come a time when you have to *dare to be a Daniel*.

There is, however, also a very strong tradition in our religion of upholding authority. Civilised life is not possible where there is anarchy. Normally, we have to obey the law, even when we don't like it, even when we think it's unfair. An ordered society is a gift from God and we do not lightly break the Law. And, if it did come to a point where we absolutely had to break the Law as the Government attempts to enforce secularism and multi-culturalism in every area of our public and private lives, any such law-breaking would have to be non-violent. Daniel was thrown into the lions' den. He didn't attempt a *coup d'état*.

June 2nd

Ecclesiastes 8 vv 6-17

Solomon is puzzled. He knows that goodness and wisdom work with the grain of the Universe. God is good and wise. So the good and wise man is working with God and things ought to work out for him. Conversely, the wicked fool might be expected to be on the road to ruin. Only sometimes – too often perhaps – it doesn't seem to work out like that. The fool and the villain prosper while the world of the decent person falls apart. Solomon doesn't know what to think. You might as well eat, drink and merry. In the end, you can only do your best and trust God Who is infinitely wiser than you are.

June 3rd

Ecclesiastes 9 vv 1-12

Really these rather beautiful verses are making the same point. However hard you try, however carefully you plan, your best efforts may come to nothing because of events you could not possibly have foreseen. What this means is that you just have to trust God for your life. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talks about the way people worry about material things, the practical things of every day life. And it is all pointless. Our Lord's conclusion? *Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.*

June 4th

Ecclesiastes 9 vv 13-18

I love this little parable. A humble man saves the city by his wisdom, but everybody then forgets about him. The saviour of the city might have expected honour, fame and wealth, but, in this case, he doesn't get them. Public opinion is fickle. Sometimes the crowds go overboard about someone – often for achieving very little, scoring a winning goal, or singing a successful song. Often, real heroes are ignored. None of that matters, essentially, however. What matters is to do what is right, irrespective of any reward.

June 5th

Ecclesiastes 10 v 1

The newspapers are always trying to catch politicians out in a gaff. A normally wise person says something stupid or off message and the media vultures pounce. They are just as eager to pounce on any peccadillo or mistake made in someone's past. And we the public must

enjoy all this or it wouldn't sell papers. But destroying a good man's career over an atypical slip is not only unfair to him. It robs us of his services and corrodes public life. It doesn't take much to fell a giant, but it is not always a wise thing to do.

June 6th

Ecclesiastes 10 vv 2-4

We may put on a front, but our true character comes out as soon as we are put under pressure. Jesus said, *By their fruits shall ye know them.* A wise man will act and speak wisely, whereas the fool may look good until he is actually tested.

It is difficult to act wisely when someone much more powerful than you turns on you, but it is worth the effort. If the wise walk away from such situations, they leave the fools to run the country.

June 7th

Ecclesiastes 10 vv 5-7

It does sometimes happen that entirely the wrong people are in charge. Indeed, there is always a tendency in that direction. The ascent to power may require a degree of ruthlessness, a willingness to compromise with principle, which the wise and the good find distasteful. Once one has power, it is only too often true that power corrupts. Being in a position of power also invites media scrutiny, personal attack, the exposure of one's faults and public criticism. There are many reasons why good people might want to keep out of politics, the upper reaches of the civil service and local government, and the armed forces. The problem is that, if good and wise people, will not accept the responsibility of leadership, we are stuck with the bad and the foolish. I find it very easy to be cynical about politics, but excessive cynicism corrodes public life. The Bible tells us to pray for those in authority! Maybe we Christians need to get more involved.

June 8th

Ecclesiastes 10 vv 8-20

Again we get some common sense. Mostly, you will reap what you sow. It is much better to deal with wise people than with fools. You're in trouble if you haven't got wise leadership. Sloth leads to poverty. If you talk about powerful people, you'll get caught.

June 9th

Ecclesiastes 11 v1

I've always taken this to mean to give in charity. If we are generous to those in need, if we seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness, we can expect all these things to be added unto us. Some commentators take this more prosaically as a recommendation to invest in sound business. I, however, can see no more sound an investment than using your material possessions to invest in the Kingdom of God.

June 10th

Ecclesiastes 11 vv 2-6

I think of these verses sometimes in meetings. People go on and on about what they think would be the best way to do things or the best time. There is disagreement. The arguments continue. We keep talking about what to do and how to do it, but nothing ever gets done! Agreed, a certain amount of planning is necessary, but there is a whole lot of things you cannot know and sometimes you just have to step out in faith and get on with it.

June 11th

Ecclesiastes 11 vv 7-10

Solomon is still striving for this balance. He is not a killjoy, telling us that it is pointless to enjoy the good things of life, because everything is negated by death. On the other hand, he is not telling us to forget our responsibilities. We are answerable to God for the use we make of our lives.

June 12th

Ecclesiastes 12 vv 1-7

Churches tend to be dominated by older people. Young people don't have time. They don't think it's cool to belong. Religion has a low priority in their busy lives. Older people have more time. They've had longer to grow wise. They realise they are nearer to having to give God an account. It's a shame, though. Young people need God. They need to live in love with Him. They need His support and guidance. They need to obey His moral Law in their relationships and in business. The Church needs the talents and energies of young people as well as the qualities of older people if she is to do all the good works God has prepared for her to walk in. So stop making excuses, all you young people, and join your local Church.

June 13th

Ecclesiastes 12 vv 8-14

These verses sum up the book perfectly. Life in the material world is on its own ultimately pointless. It only makes sense in the context of eternity, but eternal truth is far beyond the grasp of mortal man. There is, however, a right way to live – to live in the fear of the LORD and to keep His commandments. If you do that, you'll be doing the best you can on earth and you can trust Him for your eternity.

June 14th

Job 1 vv 1-5

The Book of Job is another wisdom book. It is concerned with the problem of undeserved suffering. People still ask *What have I done to deserve this?* when something terrible happens to them. We expect there to be justice in the universe and we find it hard to understand why good people should suffer. People who lose loved ones in road accidents demand that the other driver be made to pay with a long prison sentence. It doesn't seem right when a kind, generous person dies young of a terrible disease. How can these things happen in Universe run by a just, omnipotent God?

Job is the archetypal wise man. In everything he fears God and, at the beginning of the story, he has the anticipated blessings. He is wealthy and has a large and happy family.

I like the bit about him offering sacrifices just in case his grown up sons have sinned while partying. I guess a lot of parents worry about that!

June 15th

Job 1 vv 5-12

The popular idea of two nearly equal forces - God and the Devil – in conflict with one another is wrong, a battle which either might conceivably win. God is omnipotent. Satan is part of God's plan for the universe. He is the accuser, the adversary, the tempter. It is hard to see how good could be demonstrated if there were no evil, how there could be virtue without temptation, how there could be freedom without the possibility of making the wrong choices. Satan is necessary to God's plan for humanity. It is a warning to note that he walks up and down on the earth, a comfort that he can only do what God allows him to do. So St Paul can assure us that we will not be tempted above what we are able.

June 16th

Job 1 vv 13-22

With God's permission, Satan did all these terrible things to Job, but, at this stage, he managed to cling on. He accepted that what happened happened within the providence of God. *The LORD giveth and the LORD teeth away.* We use the same words in the funeral service. It is a comfort if you can believe, but Job was to face an even worse test.

June 17th

Job 2 vv 1-10

Having passed the first test and kept faith despite the loss of his possessions and his family, Job faces another test – the infliction of a horrible disease. Lest we treat this simply as fiction or as something that happened only a very long time ago, we should remember places in the world today, where war or natural disaster can sweep away one's home, family and possessions and then be followed by plague, as basic hygiene and medical services break down. If we are on the LORD's side we will be generous with our prayers, our giving and our political influence.

Job still manages to keep faith, but his wife can't stand it any longer. Sometimes people are amazingly strong in the face of sickness or adversity but the people who love them can't bear to see them suffer. This sometimes has the odd result that the patient in bed finds himself trying to comfort his visitors!

June 18th

Job 2 vv 11-13.

Job's comforters – Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar – won't come out of this story very well. They insist on telling Job, at great length, what they think is the cause of his problems and what he should do about them. In many ways they are wrong. They effectively bully Job. They wear him out. They make things worse for him. But, here, at this stage, they do the right thing. They come. They are there for Job. But they don't know what to say and so they keep quiet. Some people avoid talking to the bereaved or to people who have received a grim diagnosis. They just don't know what to say. They are embarrassed. But their bereaved or sick friend feels hurt, lonely and rejected. It is much better to visit even if you don't know what to say. On the other hand, however, there are people – both friends and professional carers – who overwhelm

people with their suggestions and offers of help. If you respect a patient or a widow, you have to respect her right to make her own decisions, her right to privacy, her right to keep control of her own life.

June 19th

Job 3 vv 1-26

We shan't read all the speeches of Job and his comforters. Not surprisingly, considering what has happened, Job is distraught. He wishes he had never been born or that he had been born dead. Death, he says, solves everybody's problems. Why live if life is so terrible?

Biblical characters speak their minds. They tell God what they think. They tell other people what they think. This is much better than hypocrisy, trying to pretend to God that everything is fine. God knows all about you, including what you are thinking. So you might as well be honest with Him. It can be the first step towards rebuilding your life.

There seems to be a growing consensus in C21 that some lives are just not worth living. We hear medics talk about "quality of life" with the implication that some people's lives are not worth saving. People diagnosed with serious illnesses demand the right to commit suicide. There have been several attempts to change the law to allow us to assist other people to commit suicide in these desperate circumstances.

One can understand the reasoning, but it is a dangerous idea. Abortion and divorce were both legalised to allow a compassionate response to what was believed to be a small number of difficult cases. Once legalised, however, they became the easy way out of an unwanted pregnancy or a difficult marriage. There are nearly 200,000 abortions per year in the UK and many marriages end in divorce. I think that once we accept that life is not sacred and that the patient or the patient's carers can choose to end it, the reasons for doing so will become ever more trivial and euthanasia will become a standard treatment for the seriously ill and perhaps even for bed blockers. Death is not the easy way out of suffering. We must do everything we can to alleviate suffering but we must not take it on ourselves to end life.

June 20th

Job 4 vv 1-21

I don't think I can do a detailed study of all of Job's comforters' speeches and Job's answers, but they are worth reading. They are more subtle than this standard brief summary would suggest. But basically, the comforters' argument is that Job's suffering must be his own fault. He wouldn't suffer if he didn't deserve to suffer. Eliphaz is the mildest of the three. Bildad is sharper. Zophar can be downright rude. When they fail to convince Job that he is only getting what he deserves, a younger man, Elihu weighs in, but he doesn't get very far either. The point is either that Job has done what everybody would regard as wrong and therefore deserves to be punished, or else, maybe, that no-one can be good enough for God. So everyone is a sinner and deserves to be punished. That is true enough. Human beings are called to be holy as He is holy. None of us is so holy except Jesus. Our lack of holiness separates us from God, our punishment. We are only accepted in Christ (by faith and Baptism) as His righteousness is imputed to us. However, that doesn't answer Job's problem. Why should he suffer more than others unless he is a worse sinner – which he isn't?

June 21st

Job 5 vv 1-27

What Eliphaz says is true enough – as far as it goes. I can imagine many a Christian counsellor saying much the same thing. The probably is that he is not dealing with Job's needs. He is giving a standard response to the problem of innocent suffering and it is not good enough. In this case, it is pastorally insensitive. It is not what Job needs to hear. It is theologically inadequate because it doesn't answer the basic question. If God punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous, why do the righteous apparently get punished? Maybe, suffering builds character. Maybe it corrects our faults. Maybe it will all be straightened out in the hereafter. Maybe we can see a reason for our suffering. Maybe our suffering is a consequence of our freedom to act the way we please or the freedom of other people to act the way they please. Maybe innocent suffering is a necessary consequence of the way God has set up the world, both governed by scientific laws and inclusive of chance and freedom. These are all possible answers, but they may not help a man in Job's terrible plight!

June 22nd

Job 6 vv 1-30

Job insists on the reality of his sorrows. They ought to be recorded. He believes that God is responsible for what has happened to Him. He continues to believe in God but He cannot understand why God has done this to him or why God doesn't let him die now. Job's comforters' well meant speeches are just making things worse!

June 23rd

Job 7 vv 1-21

Job's anguish is recognisable to us. When you are in such torment that hours somehow both seem to last forever and to disappear as if they never were. Job is in a close personal relationship with God and he asks, Why? Can't God leave him alone? Why should Almighty God care about a frail creature like a human being? And why does He if He is going to torment him? He accepts that, like everyone, he is a sinner. But, if this is punishment for sin, why doesn't it pass when he confesses? As I said, we'll have to leave it there, but read on, by all means, as the comforters try to convince Job that he is in the wrong and Job insists that he is not and demands the right to make his case to God.

June 24th

Job 28 vv 1-28

Chapter 28 is an amazingly beautiful interval in the Book of Job. It speaks about the wonder of the way precious metals and gems are buried in the darkness under the earth and how they are brought out by the skill and dangerous hard work of the miner. They are so beautiful and so valuable and people risk so much to get them. But what about wisdom? Isn't that infinitely more beautiful and valuable? And where do you find wisdom? *Behold the fear of the LORD, that is wisdom: and to depart from evil is understanding.*

June 25th

Job 38 vv 1-41

Many people regard these last chapters of Job as incredibly beautiful. They speak, in wonderfully poetic language, about the greatness of the Creator. For many people, *How great Thou Art* is a favourite hymn. These chapters are the biblical equivalent. Some people, however, find them unsatisfactory. They don't give Job an answer to the question of apparently undeserved suffering. What they do is to remind Job that God is infinitely greater than we are and that we human beings just have

to accept that there are some things we can't understand. If we can trust God, that is fine, but it has to be acknowledged that there are times when it is difficult. All I can say is to hang on in there. Keep praying. Keep reading your Bible. Keep coming to Church. Keep with your Christian friends – even if they are as irritating as Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar.

June 26th

Job 42 vv 1-17

Job accepted the infinity of God and that he was way out of his depth in questioning God. It wasn't wrong to ask for answers. It is, however, necessary to accept that we may not get them in this life, but still the only thing we can do is to have faith. The comforters are rebuked. Everything we do comes under judgment, including our insensitivity in dealing with other people. We need to repent of this. In the end, things do work out right for Job. God does look after us. We need to keep faith.

And finally, it is interesting that Job's daughters are singles out in a world usually dominated by men. They must have been pretty special.

June 27th

Genesis 37 vv 1-36

Some scholars believe that the stories about Joseph are part of the wisdom literature. Joseph is a well-favoured young man, part of a large and prosperous family. He is his parents' favourite. It looks as if he has everything going for him, but he is a very foolish young man. He encourages people to dislike him by his spoilt ways. Through various vicissitudes, Joseph learns wisdom and becomes God's mean of saving the Israelites (and a lot of other people) during a terrible famine.

June 28th

Genesis 39 vv 1-23

Joseph's brothers sell him as a slave, but God is looking after Joseph and he is bought by a good master. Naturally talented, hard-working and personable, Joseph soon wins Potiphar's trust and is given more and more responsibility. As Potiphar's interests prosper under Joseph's management, he is trusted with more and more, until he is effectively head of the household. Joseph still has to learn, however. Potiphar's wife falls for him and, although he resists her advances, she makes out

that he has behaved improperly towards her. Not surprisingly, Joseph finds himself in prison!

June 29th

Genesis 40 vv 1-23

Again Joseph wins trust. He earns the gaoler's favour and becomes what you might call a trustee. It is through helping the gaoler (much better than languishing in a cell) that Joseph meets two high-ranking servants of Pharaoh in the prison. They turn to Joseph in their anxiety about the meaning of their dreams. Joseph, who is learning wisdom fast, refers them to God for an answer. God gives Joseph the interpretation of the dreams and his interpretation proves to be right. All Joseph asks is that the butler will remember him when he is restored to Pharaoh's favour, but he forgets!

June 30th

Genesis 41 vv 1-57

Finally, under the providence of God, Joseph is brought to Pharaoh's palace, warns Pharaoh about the coming famine, suggests storing food in the years of plenty and is effectively put in charge of the Land of Egypt. Not bad for an irritating brat who was sold as a slave by his own brothers! Wisdom has transformed Joseph's life. So Joseph is in a position to save his own family or tribe and many other peoples when the famine finally comes. And this, of course, was God's plan all along.

So what do we make of the wisdom literature then? Human beings only prosper if they live wisely, but wisdom is more important than prosperity. Wisdom comes from God and it is in knowing God that we are wise. There are many things which we cannot understand, but God is always faithful and we can trust in Him whatever happens to us. Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: a good understanding have all they that do thereafter; the praise of it endureth for ever.

