

# Wisdom

another way of seeing God's presence in the world - 20 August 2023

## INTRODUCING TODAY'S THEME

Sometimes things go well for us and we are happy ...

I wonder what makes you feel happy? (watching the Matildas play soccer)

Sometimes things don't go so well for us and we feel sad ...

I wonder what makes you feel sad (saying goodbye to our friend John Hamilton during the week)



In today's story from the Bible there's a Mum who is feeling sad because her daughter is quite sick ... just like your Mum would be sad if Hyell or you got sick.

The Mum goes to see Jesus looking for help ...

but Jesus seems a bit grumpy and says he has to help his own people first.



The Mum keeps on talking with Jesus and helps Jesus see that everybody needs God's help ...

and Jesus heals the Mum's sick daughter.

I wonder how the Mum felt?

I wonder how Jesus felt?



## BIBLE READINGS

### **Proverbs 8:1-12, 22-35**

Does not wisdom call out?

Does not understanding raise her voice?

At the highest point along the way,  
where the paths meet, she takes her stand;  
beside the gate leading into the city,  
at the entrance, she cries aloud:

'To you, O people, I call out;

I raise my voice to all humanity.

Listen, for I have trustworthy things to say;

I open my lips to speak what is right. ...

All the words of my mouth are just;

none of them is crooked or perverse.

To the discerning all of them are right;  
they are upright to those who have found knowledge.

Choose my instruction instead of silver,  
knowledge rather than choice gold,  
for wisdom is more precious than rubies,  
and nothing you desire can compare with her.

I, wisdom, dwell together with common sense;  
I possess knowledge and discretion.

The Lord brought me forth as the first of his works,  
before his deeds of old;

I was formed long ago,  
at the very beginning, when the world came to be. ...

I was there when God set the heavens in place,  
when the Lord ... marked out the foundations of the earth.

I was filled with delight day after day,  
rejoicing always in God's presence,  
rejoicing in the whole world  
and delighting in the human race.

Now then, my children, listen to me;  
blessed are those who keep my ways.

Listen to my instruction and be wise;  
do not disregard it.

Blessed are those who listen to me,  
watching daily at my doors,  
waiting at my doorway.

For those who find me find life  
and receive favour from the Lord.

### ***Matthew 15:21-28***

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.' But he did not answer her at all.

His disciples came and urged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.'

He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.'

But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.'

He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'

She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.'

Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly.

## MESSAGE Wisdom - another way of seeing God's presence in the world

The Gospel accounts about the life and ministry of Jesus throw up plenty of surprises and unexpected twists. Today's Gospel story is certainly full of surprise as it portrays Jesus as seemingly uncaring towards the woman who seeks his help. Even when the woman falls at his feet and begs for help, Jesus appears unmoved. He claims to have a mandate only for the people of Israel and he calls the woman a dog, which was rather insulting.



But the woman perseveres and draws on her experience of domestic life where dogs do get food - even if it's only the crumbs that fall from the table. If you have a dog you'll know how true this is!

The woman is quick-witted and determined and eventually wins Jesus over. He commends her faith and her daughter is healed.

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This morning we are thinking about **wisdom** and the woman in this story shows plenty of wisdom – finding the right words to say and drawing on observations from everyday life to achieve an outcome that brings new life to her daughter.

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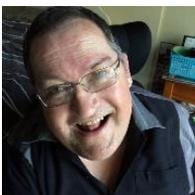
*A contemporary definition of wisdom is the ability to think and act using knowledge, experience, understanding, common sense and insight.*

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The woman in this story is surely wise according to this definition.

I thought it might prompt our own thinking if we spend a moment to recall some contemporary examples of wisdom and where we might go to find wisdom ...

- Happiness is a choice, be the change you wish to see in the world (sources - positive psychology & Gandhi)



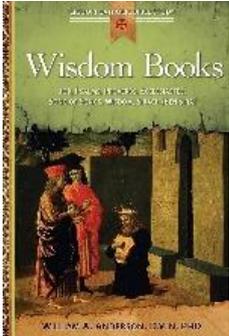
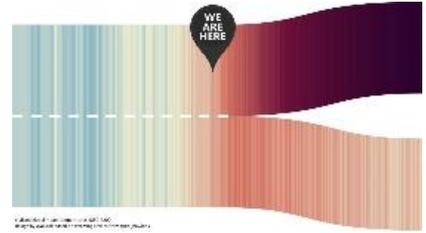
- Be happy with who you are (source - John Hamilton)



- Strong leadership by showing compassion and empathy (source - Jacinda Adern, former PM of NZ)



- Listen to the science of climate change and act accordingly (source - modern science)



Sadly, when it comes to the Bible, the wisdom writings are often overlooked and neglected ... which by implication means that this part of God's big story is also neglected. I hope to remedy that today.

Towards the end of the book of Exodus, the foundational story for Israel that we explored a few weeks ago, Moses asks to see God face-to-face.

In response, God says this is not possible but surrounds Moses on Mt Sinai in a dense cloud and proclaims the name of God ...

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*I am, I am,  
a God compassionate and gracious,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love,  
holy and just.  
(Exod 34:6-7).*

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If this is who God is, then how should we live?

In the Bible, this choice of how to live is closely tied up with wisdom and comes in two parts.

First we must decide what is the right or good course of action to take and then we must choose to follow the right way. Wisdom covers both these steps.

There are plenty of stories and guidelines in the Bible that show us the right way. One well-known verse from the book of Micah, puts it this way:

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*God has told you, O mortal, what is good.  
And what does the Lord require of you?  
To act justly, and to love mercy  
and to walk humbly with your God.  
(Micah 6:8)*

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So the first step is knowing the way and character of God.

The next step is live this out in practice.

Sound simple?

Not according to Jesus who says this in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus ...

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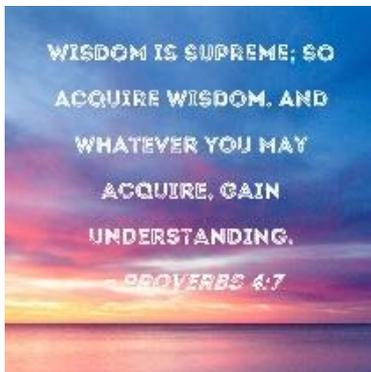
*Narrow is the gate and difficult is the path that leads to life so that few find it, while wide is the gate and easy is the path that leads to destruction and there are many who take it. (Matthew 7:13-14)*

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The classic book of wisdom in the Bible is **Proverbs**, which rarely features in our Lectionary of weekly readings for church. But this morning we're going to address this shortfall by focusing on the book of Proverbs and our reading from chapter 8 of that collection of wise sayings.



In keeping with our approach of the last few weeks, we'll first focus on the passage itself, then briefly consider the passage in its historical context and finally explore what this book teaches us about the character of God.



In our reading, there is a choice on offer – whether to listen to the voice of wisdom and so find life and prosperity or whether to ignore the voice of wisdom which leads to death.

So one initial insight is that searching for and finding wisdom requires a conscious effort.

Wisdom doesn't just fall into our laps.



Next, note that wisdom is personified as a woman. She is Lady Wisdom. This may flow from the fact that wisdom is a feminine noun in Hebrew (*hakmah*) just as the Greek noun for wisdom, *sophia*, is also feminine.

But many of the proverbs in the Bible come from either a domestic setting in the home or a business setting, both of which were seen as the realm of women. Hence the home is often a good source of wisdom, as we saw earlier in the Gospel story.

While much of the Bible is written from a male perspective, Lady Wisdom offers an alternative feminine way of understanding the world that points to women as a source of wisdom.

Men, please take note to listen to the wisdom of the women in your life!

This passage also links wisdom with creation. It suggests that wisdom was present with God before the creation of the world and delighted in watching creation unfold, including the creation of humanity. Wisdom is seen as part of God, just as in John's Gospel, the Word is also part of God and present at creation. John goes on to suggest that the Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us in the form of Jesus.



Given the similarity between the wisdom of God and the word of God, there is an argument that Jesus also represents the wisdom of God, a feminine side of God.

Turning to the historical context, wisdom writing is found in many ancient religions and is not limited to the Bible. It was highly regarded in Egypt and later in Greece. The impetus for collecting the proverbs we have in the Bible is given to King Solomon, who was viewed as being a very wise person.

One distinctive for biblical wisdom is its link to God. The book of Proverbs states several times that the beginning – or the basis or the foundation – for wisdom is fear of the Lord. Fear here is more like awe and reverence, so that the basis of biblical wisdom is worship and acknowledgement of God and God's ways.



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Which moves us onto our third approach ... how does wisdom relate to God's story in the Bible?

The connection is not as obvious as we've seen in the past few weeks. According to Job, wisdom is hidden out of plain sight.

Only God understands the way to it and knows its place.

Yet for those with eyes to see, wisdom is seen in the creation which God the Creator has established. So by observing the natural world, we can see order and patterns that reflect the wisdom of the Creator.

The writers of proverbs encourage us to consider the ways of an ant colony or an eagle soaring in the sky or a lion and to learn from them. In a similar way, Jesus suggests that we think about the birds of the air and the lilies of the field that point to the provision of God the Creator.



While wisdom may seem like an innately human pursuit as we observe life around us, the Bible suggests otherwise. How we treat our neighbour for instance – which is the ethical dimension to wisdom – flows directly from a right relationship with God.

So wisdom attempts to connect or integrate our worship and awe of God with practical everyday life. A wise person discerns what is right from what is wrong – what reflects the character of God and what is inherently selfish or greedy – and acts accordingly – whether at home, at work or in business. And of course this knowing right from wrong comes from knowing the ways of God which are just and compassionate and kind.

Jesus is a great wisdom teacher. He invites people to see the world and to see people through the eyes of a loving God.

So, for instance, Jesus teaches that everyone is welcome at God's table and that no one is excluded because of their social standing or gender or profession. And in a radical twist, Jesus suggests that giving up your life for others leads to true life while seeking to protect and preserve your life above all else leads to spiritual death.



Jesus' way of wisdom of course often goes against the wisdom of the world.

Our next song reflects on Lady Wisdom's call to come and eat and find life.

It's a new song but sung to the well-known tune of What a friend we have in Jesus.

**SONG** Wisdom's table (tune Blaenwern TiS 590)

In her house there is a table,  
richly laid with bread and wine.

All the foolish are invited;  
she calls to us 'Come and dine'.

*Come and eat at Wisdom's table,  
come and lay your burden down;  
come and learn the power of weakness –  
Wisdom's cross and Wisdom's crown.*

In this world we will have trouble  
all our comforts will collapse;  
all our answers will seem empty,  
all our hopes will seem like dreams.

*Refrain*

There are roads which lead to danger,  
there are paths which lead to life:  
Wisdom's ways are filled with choices  
for the travellers she invites.

*Refrain*

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