

# Get wise

## Sermon for the Second Sunday before Lent, 4<sup>th</sup> February 2024

**Readings** [Proverbs 8.1,22-31](#); [John 1.1-14](#)

Is it true? A good question to ask if you're trying Christian faith for size. Another good question is, Does it work? After all, why give time to something that may be true but has no effect on your everyday life?

So – how can faith in God help you, *practically*? Can God help you decide who will be the best mayor for London when we vote in three months' time? How might God help you face the challenges of old age, or of this weekend's homework?

Well, meet the book of Proverbs, a book that that is nothing if not practical and is packed with such handy tips as these:

to guarantee a loan to a stranger is a dangerous thing ([Proverbs 11:15](#))

rash words are like sword thrusts but the tongue of the wise brings healing ([12:18](#))

it's better to eat a morsel in a quiet home than eat a feast in a house of quarrels ([17:1](#))

Much of the teaching is couched as down-to-earth parental advice for young people: 'Listen, children, to a father's instruction...' ([4:1](#)). What kind of advice? Try chapter 6 on the dangers of laziness:

'Go to the ant, you lazybones, consider its ways...' ([6.6-11](#))

or chapter 7 on the perils a young man faces if he hangs about on street corners when it's getting dark ([7.6-23](#)). In this book God says, Yes, let us be practical: faith in me will make a practical difference to the way you handle your life.

Two things, though. You don't need to believe in God to see that, say, lending money to someone you've never met before is not a smart thing to do. And what if you come up against something for which the book of Proverbs doesn't have a rule, or a tip, or a life hack – like, say, the do's and don'ts of social media, or how many air miles are too many for the good of our planet? What then? Well, then you need good instincts. That is what the book of Proverbs calls the getting of wisdom ([4:5-7](#)).

But what is wisdom? Is it a thing, that is, is it *one* thing, or is it just a word we use as an umbrella for all the occasions that someone does something that isn't silly?

We talk about 'the Pound' having 'a good day', like a child having a good day at school, when what has actually gone on is a day of indescribably complex buying and selling across countless computer screens around the world. Or take the Home Secretary, who spoke the other day about 'the will of the British people', when the last time we had a chance to vote, less than half voted for his party and millions didn't vote at all.

And yet I know what he means, even if we don't agree what 'the will of the British people' is; and when money gurus talk about 'the Pound' I think they are talking about something rather than many things, or nothing.

But back to wisdom. Whoever wrote the eighth chapter of the book of Proverbs (part of which we hear today) was in no doubt. Wisdom is a thing. Or rather, Wisdom is a person, a female person, and in our reading she speaks. She tells of how she was a co-worker with God before (as we might put it) the first atom of the material universe came into existence. 'I was there,' she says, 'at God's side, like a master worker, rejoicing in his presence,' or

perhaps, ‘playing’ in God’s presence – it’s the same word the prophet Zechariah uses in his vision of Jerusalem at peace, with boys and girls playing in its streets.

What kind of woman is this lady called Wisdom? She’s very old, as old as time itself, yet she sounds pretty young at heart. She is involved in the serious stuff of bringing a universe into existence, but does it with a twinkle in her eye. She has a voice, as we hear; so how about a name? Let’s call her Sophia, the Greek word for Wisdom.

In our gospel reading, the writer of John’s gospel takes Sophia’s words today and riffs on them in relation to what he calls ‘the Word’.

Sophia says,

‘The Lord created me at the *beginning* of his work’;

‘In the *beginning* was the Word,’ says John.

Sophia says,

‘I was *beside* God’;

‘[T]he Word was *with* God,’ says John,

and so on. But then John goes further:

‘And the Word became flesh and lived among us,’

or, you could say, part of what took on human flesh in the man from Nazareth was Lady Wisdom: Sophia became Jesus.

What might it do to our picture of God, and our picture of ourselves as the people of God, if we really ponder these things, let them sink in?

If the Wisdom of God is at the same time an old woman and a playful girl, what does that do our thoughts about youth and ageing? If the Wisdom of God is seen as feminine (why is that, do you think?) and if Wisdom took on human flesh in a boy and then a man (and why was that?) then what pictures of God does that open up? If I find praying hard (and everyone does sometimes) is it because I’m working with an image of God that is too narrow, too much of one thing and too little of another?

There’s more to this than just male-and-female, young-and-old, though. There is the sheer playfulness of that reading from Proverbs, its dancing and delight. Creation is terrific and impressive; but it is also, it seems, fun, as we heard so exuberantly in the choir’s anthem<sup>1</sup>.

Our corner of creation is in trouble, and we have a lot to do to care for it better. But if we act out of fear, let’s act even more out of delight in all that heaven and earth contain.

Talking of fun, today we are ten days from the start of the season of Lent, forty-odd days to get to know better the character of this person Jesus as we prepare to mark the two most significant days in the year for the people of God: Good Friday, the day of his death; and Easter Day, the day of raising to his new life.

There are many ways to do this, but they all take a bit of time. The wisdom of God does not come at once. It grows in us gradually, like a plant. And, like a plant, it needs feeding, it needs the compost of praying and Bible reading and worship. If you want some ideas about how to use this season of Lent wisely – and even make it fun – ask me afterwards.

God wants us to live wisely, but God wants *us* to do it, not do it for us. Or rather, God wants to do it with us and through us, to be the Word beneath the words we speak<sup>2</sup>. God wants us to have what St Paul calls ‘the mind of Christ’.

The wise Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us. Now God says to each of us: Let my Word be made flesh in *you*.

<sup>1</sup> ‘The heavens are telling the glory of God’ by Josef Haydn, performed [here](#) by the Academy of Ancient Music.

<sup>2</sup> The phrase is from Malcolm Guite’s poem [O Sapientia](#)

I cannot think unless I have been thought,  
Nor can I speak unless I have been spoken.  
I cannot teach except as I am taught,  
Or break the bread except as I am broken.  
O Mind behind the mind through which I seek,  
O Light within the light by which I see,  
O Word beneath the words with which I speak,  
O founding, unfound Wisdom, finding me,  
O sounding Song whose depth is sounding me,  
O Memory of time, reminding me,  
My Ground of Being, always grounding me,  
My Maker’s Bounding Line, defining me,  
Come, hidden Wisdom, come with all you bring,  
Come to me now, disguised as everything.