

SERMON PREACHED AT THE OPENING OF THE FIRST SESSION OF THE 51ST SYNOD OF THE DIOCESE OF NEWCASTLE – 24 OCTOBER 2014 –BY DR PETER STUART, THE ASSISTANT BISHOP OF NEWCASTLE (Proverbs 8: 22 – 31)

At a conference a few weeks ago I heard a highly qualified US clergyman, with doctorates in biblical studies and psychology, speak of two major experiences at age 5 and 7, which shaped his life profoundly. He used his own story to introduce his study and conclusion that every human being has a number of extraordinary experiences which do not fit into the normal patterns of our lives which provide insight, opportunity, guidance, care and the like. He went on to remind us that in many cultures these life changing experiences are “understood to be common, meaningful and trustworthy” as they were in previous eras of western culture. The contemporary western emphasis on particular ways of thinking has resulted in such experiences being pushed to the side as unreal and untrueⁱ.

Our speaker was a gifted storyteller and he recounted the events of 1937 and 1939 that shaped him we could understand why they were seared into in his memory and changed him. A common reflection was of others in the room also having profound spiritual events but acknowledging that they do not speak of them much, if at all, for fear of being misunderstood or diminished by others. We no longer have a comfortable language of such encounters in our culture and the culture shapes our conversation in the church.

Over the years it has been my privilege to speak with people of other cultures who engage the world differently. As people of aboriginal nations speak - their encounter with land and history touches their soul in ways that our conceptual frameworks struggle to grasp. In listening to Muslims explore Christianity; I have heard ways of engaging the spiritual devoid of the layers of rationalism that we have normalised.

As people of faith; we would not struggle with the idea of God encountering humanity but we may well have hidden or pushed away our expectations and exploration of those encounters rather than celebrating and sharing them. As Western Christians we need to be alert to the possibility that our insights into God and God’s actions have become culturally blinkered. We have stopped seeing some things that are there to be seen.

If we can remove the blinkers then so much of what we are doing here tonight can be released in our thinking and in our lives. The language we use the things they point to can say much more to us and invoke greater meaning for us. We will be able to hear people speak to us in different ways and in them, as beloved bearers of God’s image, learn more of God. We will discover that for as much as we know there is so much more still to be known.

It is from such a starting point that the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament comes and books such as Proverbs come into their own. Wisdom is a very wide concept with personal characteristics leading us into God.

Lets look a little more closely at the Proverbs and our reading tonight –

In keeping with the ancient near eastern practice of passing on good advice to boys, especially those who will be future leaders, most of the book is a collection of sayings of wise advice. The first part of the book seeks to explain the source of that advice – to explain and encounter with that which is beyond their own activity – and provide understanding. WISDOM is personified as female and deeply entwined with the life and activity of God. From Wisdom comes creation and the way of living properly and fully with creation!ⁱⁱⁱ

It is a dissonant or disturbing text because it generates ideas and insights into God with which people have been wrestling for centuries; but that is its point – to make us think, reflect and pray.

The Book of Proverbs as we receive it is an edited collection of sayings most likely finding its complete form just over 3 centuries before the birth of Christ. It bears the makers of Hebrew, Egyptian and Greek cultures, as well as othersⁱⁱⁱ. It contains what was seen as timeless advice and is an intensely theological book honouring the God of Israel who had become known as the one and only God. Around the collection of sayings (chapters 10 – 29) we have profound theological reflection as the authors seek to name and theologise their experience. The reality of Wisdom beyond the individual was known and celebrated. The writers in response to Holy Encounter seek to name, frame and interpret their experience.

We have chapter 8 verses 22 - 31 before us. Knowing that in verses 1 -4, Wisdom is described as feminine and in verses 32 – 36 we are commanded to listen to wisdom, we learn in

- Verses 22 – 26 that Wisdom was created (or possibly translated acquired or possessed) before **any** other action in creation;
- Verses 27 – 29 that Wisdom was present when the entire cosmos was brought into being – wisdom thus knows the twists and the turns – the good and the bad.
- Verses 30 – 31 that Wisdom is a worker but because of the complexity of the translation could be a worker, a nursemaid, a child or a companion.

Verses 30 – 31 tell us so much about the divine agency that we encounter in Wisdom – She was God’s intimate – She was God’s delight day after day, playing before God all the time, playing in the world – God’s earth. Her delight was humankind.^{iv} The many manifestations of Wisdom invite us to see Her as a young girl doing cart wheels – the suckling nurse giving life – the quiet craftswoman weaving her cloth – the one in all things that brings a smile to God. The ancient people of faith recognised this and called people to this life of study and play, industry and laughter, relationship and abundance. The wise life was evident in some distinct practices.

With all of this engagement it is no surprise that in the Early Church, the fathers wrestled with whether wisdom was a pre-Christian expression of Christ or the Spirit and worked hard to incorporate these insights into their theology.

One of a number of things we can affirm is that God was and is prompting and provoking people to wise, ethical and moral living. In the same centuries we see the emergence of the virtues traditions in Greek philosophy.^v We observe virtues such as courage, integrity and justice emerging as universal dispositions for human well-being along with faith, compassion and wisdom. As Proverbs embraces character and intellect in setting out an ethical vision for the world and names it as part of God’s prompting, so we see such characteristics in other traditions but, as with Paul at the altar of the unknown God, there is a desperate need to see such movements as part of the life of God. There can be good reason for bringing the language of others into conversation with our language and insight. Much common ground and grace can be found as we share experiences together.

As the centuries unfolded we can see the exploration of the Wisdom and Virtues traditions taking new shape and life as the early Christians named their experiences of the Holy Spirit being present in the lives of disciples. The Spirit brings forth fruit which embodies wisdom – love, joy, peace, patience, generosity, kindness, goodness and self control.

So what might all this mean for Synod and us as a Diocese? At least two questions emerge for me. I pose them to myself, the Synod, the new archdeacons commencing their ministry, to us all –

- **In what ways have we/you/I been culturally conditioned and thus less able to moved by the playful, dancing, confronting, intervening life of God?**
- **What are the markers/signs of wise ministry that we/you/I seek to show and will expect from others?**

I ponder that as we come to Synod our culture is more shaped by Federal Parliament's Question Time than a conversation around a campfire. I worry that we will value some ways of speaking over others and not see every vote as an action prayer. I hope that the robust exchange of ideas can take its place along with generous hospitable relationships but sometimes coffee conversations are places of hurt and anguish.

God is constantly prompting, provoking and call us into abundant life and when we seek to lock ourselves into postions and ways that do not reflect the loving, dancing, delightful virtuous life of wisdom he calls us on. We will experience God because God wants us to experience Him and be transformed.

May we way find ways of speaking of experience and bearing witness to wisdom was we meet together in Synod.

SOME OF THE RESOURCES USED IN PREPARING THIS ADDRESS

- ⁱ J Harold Ellens (2014) Toward Development of a Science of the Paranormal
http://www.bccm.com.au/sites/default/files/files/Harold%20Ellens_TempletonTowardDevelopmentOfScienceOfParanormal.pdf
- ⁱⁱ Raymond C Van Leeuwen (1997) *The Book of Proverbs* The New Interpreter's Bible Volume 5.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Katherine J Dell (2009) *Proverbs 1 – 9: Issues of Social and Theological Context* Interpretation 63(3)
- ^{iv} John C Holbert (2013) Trinity Sunday, The Delight of Wisdom: Reflections on Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31
(<http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/Trinity-Sunday-John-Holbert-05-20-2013>)
- ^v Christopher B Ansberry (2010) *What does Jerusalem have to do with Athens? The moral vision of the Book of Proverbs and Aristotle's Nicomachean ethics* Hebrew Studies vol 51
<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/hbr/summary/v051/51.ansberry.html>