The wisdom of God

Every year from 1995 until 2019, I was part of a model railway exhibition at the church Beth and I attended when we were first married. It was a major event in the life of the congregation, as well as for the local community, and for a weekend the church buildings were transformed into a model railway and family entertainment centre. Over the years, there were many attractions – in the early days, a ride-on- real steam railway set up in the carpark, sometimes a display of Meccano, usually storytelling sessions, sometimes a real live Fat Controller (from Thomas the Tank Engine), once or twice an official opening by the mayor, sometimes a pipe band or a visiting choir, always a jumping castle, a sausage sizzle and a Devonshire tea stand. And always, many, many model railways, mostly run by – as my late father once described them – grumpy old men in cardigans.

One thing that was unique about that model railway exhibition, was that the church building – which displayed model railways all day Saturday and again on Sunday afternoon, was turned back into a functional worship space on Sunday morning, and not only that, each year, a special "train themed" worship service took place on that morning.

You may well wonder what a "train themed" worship service was like, because if you're at all familiar with the bible, you'll realise that there is very little in the scriptures about trains. In fact, there is nothing.

But that wasn't necessarily an obstacle, and in fact one piece of scripture that was used several times for that service – was a fairly obscure verse from the book of Proverbs. Now, it doesn't actually talk about railways, but that didn't stop it being the basis for 'train themed' church services, and several times they had a line of children across the front of the church each holding up an A4 page with a picture of a locomotive or carriage with a word from the verse on it. And after that, they could 'choof choof' off, making the sound of a train to kid's church. (Which had to be held outside that day, because the church hall was filled with model trains).

That verse was Proverbs 22:6, which in the King James translation is "Train up a child in the way he should go; and when he is old, he will not part from it".

That sort of thing, is most people's exposure to the book of Proverbs. Useful sayings. Good principles. In the book of Proverbs we can find useful sayings such as:

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (1:7)
A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger (15:1)
Without wood a fire goes out [and] without gossip a quarrel dies down (26:20)

And this one, which truly speaks to my heart:
Grey hair is a crown of splendour; it is attained in the way of righteousness. (16:31)

The book of Proverbs is sometimes referred to as collection of Jewish wisdom and indeed in chapter 1, they are attributed to Solomon. The book opens with: *The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:*
[2] *for gaining wisdom and instruction;*
for understanding words of insight…

But the book of Proverbs is much more than simply a collection of wise sayings – the reading that we've heard today from Chapter 8 of Proverbs, isn't a series of wise sayings, instead it's a piece of poetry. On the face of it, it's a bit strange: We know God as God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit – the three persons of the Trinity, but this reading seems to be about another person… Wisdom. And it's a woman! – "Does not wisdom call out? Does not understanding raise her voice?" we heard in verse 1.

But Wisdom isn't a person of the trinity: and Wisdom isn't separate from God the father, God the Son or God the Holy Spirit. Rather, wisdom pervades God's character. God the father IS wise. God the Son IS wise, and God the Holy Spirit IS wise.

God is never unwise. And as we, as followers of Jesus, grow in the knowledge and love of God, so too do we grow in Godly wisdom. The letter of James tells us that "*that wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere"* (James 3:17), and then James challenges us: "*Who is wise… among you? Let [them] show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.*"

At this point, I should probably pause and ask people who are wise to raise their hands. But perhaps raising your hand to that question would not be a wise thing to do.

Because wisdom isn't something that we merely think, or feel or understand. If we are wise, then it will show in our actions. Just like if we really love one another, as Jesus told us to, then that will show in our actions. I think we can test ourselves against that… and we can test ourselves against that list that James gives us too: Before we claim to be wise, let's ask ourselves if we are peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere, and if we show wisdom by our good lives and by deeds done in humility.

That can be a bit daunting.

In our society, wisdom is often thought of as being pretty much the same as intelligence or knowledge. And you can probably think of examples of people who aren't particularly smart or educated but who behave wisely, and on the other hand, you can probably

think of people who are intelligent and knowledgeable, but who have shown themselves to be unwise.

I reckon the classic example is cigarette smoking. If you are somewhat knowledgeable, you will have learned that tobacco smoking is harmful to your health. I think every child in every primary school in the country knows that… But how many people don't have the wisdom to apply that knowledge?

I know in my working life, and in my church life, my knowledge and intelligence has brought me to conclusions about how things should be done or what the truth is, and I have boldly gone and fought for things or fought over things, knowing that I was absolutely right, but where wisdom – and certainly hindsight – would have led to quite a different approach.

Friends: Wisdom is there for us all. Wisdom, as we heard in the reading, calls out to us.

In today's reading, wisdom is the personification of God's wisdom – and is a 'she'. Wisdom is portrayed as a woman who guides us and helps us. Wisdom was present at creation and works with the creator. We read that God approves of those who listen to Wisdom's counsel. Wisdom should affect every aspect of our lives, from beginning to end – and we should be sure to open all aspects of our lives to God's wisdom.

Proverbs tells us that wisdom calls, and that she calls from highest point along the way so that we may hear, beside the path that we all travel, from the gates of the city that we all go through and from the entrances and doorways that we all enter. There is nowhere, and no part of our lives where God's wisdom is not present.

John Wesley commented on verses two and three – observing that the hills were high places, from where wisdom would be best seen and heard. And that the where the paths meet and gates and entrances were places of many options, where travellers would have to make decisions. Should we take the high road or the low road? Should we take the broad way or the narrow one? Should we go into this place or the next one?

Wisdom always calls to us. She waits by the door of our house when we go out and when we come back home. She – wisdom – is in our churches, and our workplaces, and at the shops and at the hospital. Wherever we go – wisdom is there. Of course, the question for us is – are we listening? Are we open to God's wisdom?

When we get to verse 22, wisdom describes her origin as being the first of God's works, even before the creation of the world.

In verses twenty-four to twenty-nine, reflecting the creation narratives in Genesis, the author of Proverbs tells us about the various creative acts of God, in a sequence. Back in Genesis they are mentioned to declare their existence, their very creation by God, but

here they are mentioned to declare Wisdom's pre-existence, and wisdom's existence in their creation.

When there were no watery depths, I was given birth, says wisdom
when there were no springs overflowing with water;
[25] *before the mountains were settled in place,*
before the hills, I was given birth,
[26] *before he made the world or its fields*
or any of the dust of the earth.
[27] *I was there when he set the heavens in place … [and so on]*

In verse thirty, we read of Wisdom constantly at the side of God the creator, and Wisdom who was filled with delight and rejoiced in God's presence. Just as the wisdom of God was present throughout the act of creation, the wisdom of God also continues throughout the whole of creation today.

Wisdom is with God, but wisdom is also God's gift to humanity.

In the Old Testament Israel's teachers identified divine Wisdom with the Law or the Spirit of God, but in the New Testament wisdom is identified with a person; Paul writes to the Corinthians: "Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption." (1 Cor 1: 30) Without Jesus we would be disconnected from God. We would not know God. Jesus, is our lifeline – a link to God, a link to God's love, a link to God's wisdom, a link to everlasting life.

But we need to be careful, because God's wisdom is not human wisdom. What passes for wisdom in 21st century life is sometimes not God's wisdom.

We read about the wisdom of God throughout the scriptures – the Old and the New Testaments. God's choices do not always, on the face of them, conform to worldly wisdom, but with the benefit of hindsight we can look at them and see God's wisdom at work. And in the teachings of Jesus, we can see the application of God's wisdom for us today.

Blessed are the meek, Jesus said, for they shall inherit the earth. (Matt 5:5) That's the wisdom of God – but the wisdom of the world is that the meek can be pushed aside.

The last will be first, and the first will be last – according to Jesus, but according to the world it's generally first in best dressed, the early bird catches the worm, or even the quick and the dead.

The wisdom of the world is that the Lord helps those who help themselves. But it is precisely those who could not help themselves that Jesus helped in his ministry.

According to the wisdom of the world, the rightful king, the saviour of the world wouldn't allow himself to be humiliated and beaten and crucified on a hill outside Jerusalem. And yet that is what he did, that is what the wisdom of God dictated.

The attention of the world is on the rich and the powerful, but the attention of God is on all people. The rich and the poor alike. And so often it is the poor, the week and the needy, who realise the truth of God's wisdom and God's love and turn to him.

In fact, according to the wisdom of the world, if something goes wrong, you write it off and start again. But when the world went wrong, when creation fell, and all fell short of the glory of God, God didn't write it off. He didn't write us off. Instead, he sent his son into creation to save us. To teach us, to die for us, and to rise again for us.

I've reflected in recent years on how the modern church – in all its denominations – sometimes wavers between God's wisdom and the world's wisdom. Wavers between love and compassion on one hand, and sound bureaucracy and businesslike process on the other. So often, we want to back winners, follow the wisdom of the world and put our faith in strong organisation, grand plans, and in the strength of numbers. To give up on the weak and struggling.

But I don't think that's the way of Jesus. I don't think that's God's wisdom.

God's wisdom is with us. It surrounds us. It will delight in us, and we should delight in it.

God's wisdom is calling out to us. Calling out from the heights, calling out from where the paths meet, calling out from the city gates, and the entrances and doorways.

God's wisdom is calling out to us here at St Ives Uniting, and to all who follow Jesus – to each one of us, and all of us together.

The question is, are we open to God's wisdom? Are we prepared to put our faith and trust in the wisdom of God rather than the wisdom of the world? We may be few in number, we may be older, we may be living in an increasingly secular society, but as the old hymn reminds us "we are weak, but he is strong".

God has reached out to each one of us, and to all of us. God's wisdom is calling out to us.

But the question for each of us is: Are we listening?

Amen