

3.30pm Evensong

Proverbs 2.1-11

May I speak in the name of God
who is Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.
Amen

My secondary school was housed in a beautiful, if dilapidated, Palladian house in rural Wiltshire. Each year the term began when we assembled under a light filled dome around the central staircase while our Head Master read one of the Wisdom passages from Proverbs. In those formative years I learned to love wisdom before I came to personal faith in Jesus.

Wisdom had that exotic precious quality of something to be sought for, the pearl of great price, the treasure worth a great journey. Wisdom meant bookshelves full of philosophy, Plato and Shakespeare, the orders of classical architecture and the proportions of a Renaissance painting.

Wisdom was heaped up
With a cargo of ivory,
And apes and peacocks,
Sandalwood, cedarwood, and sweet white wine.

Carried by that Quinquireme of Nineveh from distant Ophir,
in the words of John Masefield's poem (Cargoes).

We have been shaped to long for wisdom,
because wisdom is holy,
we long for it as we long for God.
Wisdom has been with God from the beginning,
moving over the waters as creation unfolded.

In the years since I have been on a journey of exploration coming to understand ever more deeply how we acquire or more particularly participate in wisdom in God and more especially in Jesus.

Wisdom and knowledge, while related are not the same thing.
Perhaps you know the old joke –
knowledge is being able to categorise a tomato as a fruit,
wisdom is knowing that it does not belong in a fruit salad.

You can't learn this kind of wisdom by reading or study,
it can't be heaped up like perfumed wood or fine wine,
we acquire wisdom through life experience,
through the messy business of growing up,
experimentation and practice.
So you need to smell and taste a tomato
to know that it will not mix well with melon and grapes.

We try to pass on wisdom by other means.
The Old Testament contains not only the wisdom of lived experience in
the proverbs, in the psalms and in the story of Job,
but also in the commandments in the Torah.
There are plenty of laws about not mixing unsuitable things together;
surf and turf, wool and linen, milk and blood,
but nothing about tomatoes and sugar.

But God in God's wisdom came to offer us not a set of rules or
aphorisms, but a life,
a life we cannot simply read about,
but can also experience as we weave the story of Jesus into our lives.

Stories and wisdom have a special relationship.
The theologian David Ford (author of *Christian Wisdom*, no relation)
writes, "Whole lives are the bearers of the wisdom of Scripture"
and lives are known through the telling of stories.

We make sense of our own lives by telling stories,
and we tell those stories in the light of other stories that inspire our
imaginations and yearnings.
My twelve year old self was inspired by the stories of artists, poets and
actors, by Samuel Palmer, WH Auden, and Ellen Terry, as well as the
fictional adventures of the March sisters (*Little Women*).

As we grow in faith,
the life stories of the people of God become part of our life story as
well.

On the long journey of faith particular stories gained resonance for me:
I remembered as a small child reading the Ladybird book telling the
story of the calling of Samuel as I began to hear God's whispered call;
I sat on the floor like Mary at Bethany listening to Jesus teach;
I have travelled in my imagination many times along the road to Emmaus,
as Jesus interprets the scriptures.

I have shared too, in the stories of others who have made the stories of
Jesus the guiding narrative in their own lives.

Today the church remembers and celebrates the life of Francis,
the little friar of Assisi

who longed to share in the story of Jesus so deeply
that he prayed for the marks of the cross in his own flesh.

At times when Jesus seems too distant,
to difficult to grasp,

it can be easier for us to live imaginatively in the stories of those all too
human saints,

to share Francis' joy in birds and cabbages,

to laugh at his jokes,

to pray with him "My God and my all."

We call this church the cathedral because it is the "cathedra"
or teaching seat of the bishop.

These days that teaching ministry is dispersed throughout the church,
but I want to suggest, rather boldly,

that as a cathedral we have a special responsibility
to be a seat of wisdom.

Cathedral congregations sometimes think that the teaching of wisdom is
the responsibility of the clergy.

There is no doubt, and I say this as I preach the third sermon of the
weekend, that there is a particular pressure on cathedral clergy to
"preach well" whatever that means!

Well, the good news, friends, is that it is not all down to me and my
clergy colleagues...

David Ford suggests that every church, whether cathedral or not,
is a school, a school of desire and wisdom.

It is a school of desire because it is here that we express our longing for
God in prayer and praise.

We do that as a community both gathered and dispersed, encouraging each other in the good times and carrying one another when times are harder.

It is a school of wisdom because it is here that we share our stories and the story of the whole people of God.

In the months to come I hope to hear many of your stories, to learn the stories that have shaped this city and this congregation. Together I pray that we will listen with humility to folk whose life stories that have been unvoiced in the past making space for stories to be shared and heard in new ways.

I pray that those stories, woven with the stories that have shaped each of us, held together by God's story in Jesus, will begin to shape our life together.

I look forward to travelling with you on a journey in search of wisdom and to sharing stories that will ignite imaginations. We will experiment and practice. Experiment with new ways of sharing the gospel stories, fresh invitations to encounter God, innovations in hospitality. We will practice those holy habits of dwelling imaginatively in the scriptures, prayer and worship, love and service. Above all, I pray that we will be a story telling people, encouraging each other, listening and learning to tell our own story of God's faithfulness and love, living the sacrificial story of humility and love, the life story that we share with Jesus.