

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER¹
The Second Sunday after Christmas²

The Rev. Warren E. Shaw,³ Supply Priest

Lessons:⁴

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the ninth Chapter of the Proverbs.⁵

“Wisdom hath builded her house, she hath hewn out her seven pillars: She hath killed her beasts; she hath mingled her wine; she hath also furnished her table. She hath sent forth her maidens: she crieth upon the highest places of the city, Whoso is simple, let him turn in hither: as for him that wanteth understanding, she saith [SETH] to him, Come, eat of my bread, and drink of the wine which I have mingled. Forsake the foolish, and live; and go in the way of understanding. ... The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fourth Chapter of the Second Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians.⁶

“Therefore seeing we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we faint not; But have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully; but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God. But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them. For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus’ sake. For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson:

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,
and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.”⁷

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

Wisdom in the Bible is a very practical concept. It basically refers to the ability to make good decisions and to give good advice. In the ancient Orient it was attributed to the counselors who give advice to rulers, such as the wise men who came to pay tribute to the baby Jesus. Their advice and counsel was based largely upon astrology. They read signs in the heavens and cast horoscopes.

Wisdom was also attributed to the men and women who read cards and tea leaves and palms and the flights of birds and other omens that were believed to predict the future and indicate the will of the gods.

Making good decisions is also required of people who create things and build things. Artists have to select the medium in which to work, the colors to use, the scale, the shapes, and many other variables. Artisans and craftsmen have to make decisions about the tools and the materials to use and the way to use them. So wisdom is attributed to them as well.

In the Bible, wisdom is based upon what is called “the fear of the Lord”. That’s a somewhat misleading phrase. When we think about fear, we think about panic or at least about looking for ways to escape a situation or defend ourselves from attack. But the fear of the Lord is something different. It is more akin to overwhelming awe.

To fear the Lord is to recognize the immensity of His glory and the vast metaphysical distance between His nature and our own. He is not just our buddy in the sky. He is our Maker and our ultimate Judge. Our life is borrowed from Him and sustained by Him. We would not exist and could not continue to exist apart from His sovereign will. To recognize that is to fear the Lord and that, according to the Bible, is when we begin to acquire the ability to make good decisions.

There is therefore a certain humility in wisdom which makes it different from the wisdom of the pagan world or the secular world. In those worlds, we are in control. In the Biblical world, God is in control.

In First Corinthians, St. Paul contrasts the wisdom of the world with the wisdom of the Cross, which the world considers to be utter foolishness. But the fool, as it says in the Psalms, is the one who has said in his heart that there is no God, and as a result cannot understand either the basis of his own existence or that of the world around him.

“Where is the wise man?”, asks St. Paul. “Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” So the passage in the book of Proverbs that appeals to those who are simple and have no sense is directed at those who do not fear God.

In that passage, wisdom is personified as a woman. Many people misinterpret that. They refer to another passage in Proverbs where wisdom is present at the creation of the world and interpret that to mean there is a feminine member of the Godhead either alongside the Trinity or as the Person of the Holy Spirit, which is then said to be feminine. I must say that the word for spirit, like the word for wisdom, is indeed a feminine noun in Greek, but gender does not equate with sexuality, and in any event, sexuality of any kind is not an attribute of God. The same passage also specifies that wisdom is a creation of God, and surely that is not true of the Holy Spirit.

But whenever wisdom is personified in the Bible, it is personified as a woman, perhaps because women are smarter than men. Let’s not argue that point, Gentlemen.

I would suggest, however, that it is a feminine trait to respond to the initiatives of others and women in general seem to be more responsive than men to the initiatives of God. That's one reason, I suspect, that there are more women in church than there are men.

Just as wisdom is a response to God's activity, so the Church exists for the same purpose. The Church is always spoken of in feminine terms as the bride of Christ. The Church does not initiate; she responds. When the Blessed Virgin says, "I am the handmaid of the Lord, Let it be to me according to your word", she is speaking as the Church and for the Church.

So what does this woman, this personified wisdom, do in the passage from Proverbs? She does what the Church does. She builds a structure and invites people to come in. That structure is built on seven pillars. There is all kinds of symbolism there: seven sacraments, the seven spirits of God, the seven churches of Asia and the seven angels in Revelation. She especially invites those who lack wisdom, who do not fear the Lord, to come and learn how to make good decisions—better decisions than they can make on the basis of worldly wisdom, which is not responsive to The Holy Spirit.

She sets before them bread and wine and invites them to abandon their former ways and walk in the way of insight. Insight into what? Insight into the ways of God, which are the ways of life.

In the Old Testament, this means learning the law. In the New Testament it means learning to walk in the way of the Cross, the way of sacrifice and service rather than the way of acquisition and self-aggrandizement.

Such wisdom is learned in the womb of the Church, where it is nurtured and developed before being released into the world. And if it is not learned here and nurtured here and developed here, then we are the foolish ones for coming here, because the wisdom of the world is more readily learned elsewhere.

God does not compel. He offers, and He invites. Wisdom is His servant and His gift. She has built her house. She has set up her seven pillars. She has set her table. In her name, I invite all who lack the wisdom of God to come and learn.

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St. Thomas Episcopal Church
Orange, Virginia

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¹ “Any set of Psalms and Lessons appointed for the evening of any day may be read at the morning service, and any set of morning Psalms and Lessons may be read in the evening.” *Concerning the Service of the Church*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

² This sermon was originally written on the Old Testament Lesson for Propers 15B according to the lectionary of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, Year B, 2006.

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⁴ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xiii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

⁵ Proverbs 9:1-6, 10 (KJV).

⁶ II Corinthians 4:1-6 (KJV).

⁷ Proverbs 9:10 (RSV).