

Trinity 10 2009

Wisdom has built her house,
she has hewn her seven pillars.
She has slaughtered her animals, she has mixed her wine,
she has also set her table.

This rather splendid image of wisdom inviting us to a feast in palatial surroundings is a much more palatable image than the strange words which Jesus uses – **Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.**

It isn't really surprising that those listening to Jesus got upset and walked away. We are so used to this imagery in the Christian church that we tend to overlook its shock value.

But, look carefully and you can see the parallels between these two passages. In the Gospel, true wisdom is freely offered to us, like a meal, in Christ, in his body and blood, his sacrifice.

Here, in this service, we remember this meal in a ritualised form. We share a small amount of bread and wine (very small amounts of wine at the moment).

Sadly, communion does not make us instantly wise. But, if we approach the altar truly "in remembrance of Jesus", it opens our hearts and minds to his teaching and to his love; through this openness, we can gradually become wiser.

Wisdom is also the theme of the epistle. Over the past few weeks, we have been hearing parts of the letter to the Ephesians, a church which seems to be getting rather a lot wrong. In this passage we hear:

- be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, ¹⁶making the most of the time, because the days are evil. ¹⁷So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. ¹⁸Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery.

Perhaps they have even been using the communion wine to get drunk!

There is nothing wrong with wine, it isn't in itself evil or wrong, indeed from St John's gospel we know that Jesus himself turned water into wine at the wedding and that, He and his disciples drank wine. But that is a far cry from being drunk. When drunk, we lose self control, and, in some circumstances this can damage either ourselves or other people. It is not wise to get drunk.

This passage from Ephesians follows the tradition of the Old Testament wisdom literature, by which I mean the books of Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Ecclesiasticus, and Wisdom (the last two being part of the apocrypha).

These books acknowledge the importance of **experience** for us as thinking beings.

When a child touches something hot, it learns that this is not a good idea. No amount of teaching prior to this will have comparable impact. It hurts. The lesson is learnt from experience – not only that hot things burn, but that what mummy said was true. From that can come the internal speculation that perhaps other things she has said may be true as well.

So, as thinking beings, we reflect upon all our experiences in the light of what we have been taught. Throughout the Wisdom literature, we find writers wrestling with difficult questions about the meaning of life; in particular they explore the Law and interpret it for different contexts, recognising that just because something is legal, it is not necessarily wise, and equally, just because something is illegal, does not necessarily imply that the law is sensible in all contexts.

It is this interrelationship between the law and wisdom that caused Jesus such problems.

The law was given to Moses in order that a stable society might be created. If people are allowed to murder, or steal, or change marriage partners whenever they like, there can be no stability in society. The law was necessary because people need boundaries. Why? Because they do not have limitless wisdom.

However, no matter how hard the original lawgiver may attempt this, no codification of the law can cover every eventuality, and there will always be people who ask, 'what if...' in an attempt to define the law more precisely.

By the time of Jesus, the law had become more and more detailed, had been interpreted and elaborated many times. As a result, it had often drifted far from its original aims, and was no longer really fit for purpose. Observation of the law was driven not by an understanding of its purpose but by a slavish adherence to its form. . In Matthew's gospel Jesus rages at the Pharisees who are meticulous in their tithing of herbs but fail completely in those matters of justice and mercy that are at the heart of the law – he says 'you strain out a gnat but swallow a camel'.

When the law is really detailed, there is no need for common sense, no need for a sense of personal ethical responsibility. You have only to look at some of the health and safety laws today and you get the picture.

Jesus forcefully reminded people of the basics of love and compassion, the essential rules by which society functions and he sort to cut the red tape, the detailed regulation. We must always remember that He never said that the law of Moses should be superseded, far from it, but he did seek to show how the law should be interpreted and he was never afraid of pointing out instances of how applying the detail of the law made the law an ass.

Over zealous use and interpretation of the law to regulate behaviour leads to foolishness, which then requires more laws to contain it. If we were truly wise we would need no laws, but we are not truly wise. This was true in the time of Jesus and is true now.

The writers of the wisdom passages in the bible addressed many of the ethical problems of their day. Much of what they said -- for example, about drunkenness – is as relevant today as it was when it was written. Then as now, wisdom and law needed to be partners in society but they were and will always be uneasy partners, for the law assumes foolishness.

If we were all wise, there would be no drunkenness of our streets at night. Do we legislate on the assumption that everyone is foolish, and ban all alcohol, which is more or less the attitude we have taken with some health and safety issues? I think there would be much opposition to this, and evidence from elsewhere indicates that it

does not completely solve the problem anyway, anymore than making cocaine illegal has stopped it being used.

Our Moslem neighbours might disagree and argue for tougher laws, and when we criticise the severity of Sharia law, quite reasonably point out the failures of our so-called “Christian society”.

But I would argue that what we need is not more *law* or greater punishments, but more *wisdom*, more compassion, more love and more respect for the thinking behind the laws that we have, more respect for society.

Perhaps we should look afresh at the wisdom literature, for example the book of Job.

In that book we will find that Job, after all his terrible suffering, despite wanting to die, still maintains that this suffering is unjust because he has done nothing to deserve it. God finally answers him.

‘Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?’

God’s spells out his intimate relationship with nature and firmly reminds Job of his place within that creation.

When we go back to read the book of Job we will discover as Job himself did that we do not know our place. We have no sense of responsibility or indebtedness – which are vital if we are to learn wisdom.

When we have a proper sense of these, we then need to look again at the gospels and the epistles and relearn the meaning of Christ’s offering.

What do we find? We find that our life, our spiritual life, our eternal life, is dependent upon Jesus’ sacrifice. We have no power of our own. We have nothing to give, not even love, that does not come to us from God.

This gospel message about the free gift from God that is available to all is not just there for our comfort or for our personal salvation. This is the source of wisdom, that quality that underpins all good law, that enables the building of community.

As we look at the society around us, the need for this message to be spread becomes ever more urgent. It is not work for someone else. It is up to us.

Our strength for this work is provided by the bread of life which is freely offered to all people.

May God give us the grace to search for truth, the wisdom to see Christ's love in those around us and the humility to play but a small part in God's great plan.

Amen.