

Sermon Notes from CMJ
17th Sunday after Pentecost – Year B

RCL Readings – Proverbs 31:10-31; Psalm 1; James 3:13-4:3, 7-8; Mark 9:30-37

ACNA Readings – Wisdom of Solomon 1:16-2:1, 12-22; Psalm 54; James 3:13-4:6; Mark 9:30-37

Introduction. I read an article recently that began with the catchy line, ‘Life is hard but it’s harder when you’re stupid’. It made me chuckle a little, but the next sentence flipped it around, ‘Life is hard but it’s easier when you have God’s wisdom’. Knowledge, understanding and wisdom are all very closely related, but there are subtle and important differences. One definition describes knowledge as the acquiring and storing of information, which can be very positive and useful. Our world is currently overflowing with knowledge, but now there is so much information on the internet that recognizing the truth has become problematic. We really need God’s wisdom to discern and apply the knowledge that is a blessing to others. Paul says that ‘knowledge puffs up but love builds up’ (1 Cor 8:1).

Common Theme. Many of the readings this week look at wisdom and the results of its application. There is a tension between the wisdom of earth, described as unspiritual and even demonic (Jam 3:15), and the wisdom of heaven, described as pure and bearing good fruit. This is not to say that earthly rationale and the sciences have no value, as they do. Human sciences and technology have improved our quality of life and saved many people through such things as advanced medicines, new energy and sustainable agriculture. Yet, human wisdom can only go so far. Superior knowledge does not inherently make you a good person. For that, we will need the Lord, his Spirit, and his wisdom.

Proverbs 31:10-31. The final chapter of Proverbs is attributed to King Lemuel, of whom we know very little. He is not recorded in the lists of monarchs in Kings or Chronicles, and there is speculation that he is in fact not Jewish. What we know is purely from this chapter, that he is a king and that he has a wise mother who gives good advice for any leader. These ‘sayings’ of Lemuel are written in acrostic form, that is, each verse begins with a word with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. It is quite a clever arrangement, most likely functioning as a memory aid and also demonstrating the skill of the author. It is a Jewish tradition that on Friday night, the eve of the Sabbath, the husband reads or sings this poem to his wife in the presence of friends and family. The woman of valour described in this proverb has many impressive qualities which serve not only herself but also her family and household. Her diligence and hard work serve others. At the end of this long list of excellent qualities, we find the source of her valour. It is the fear of the Lord that she excels in the most. It is the foundation for all her virtuous attributes. This takes us back to the beginning of the book of Proverbs 1:7, that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. The wisdom that comes from God is selfless, not selfish. Wisdom from heaven seeks to serve and not to be served. Thus wisdom is born out in our actions and behaviour and is not without its rewards. The last verse says, ‘Give her the fruit of her hands’. This is not the initial motivation for serving others but it is the reward for having done so.

Psalm 1. In this psalm, the ways of the righteous and the ungodly are contrasted. The righteous and the non-righteous are different in the way that they think and act and to whom they belong. The ungodly,

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those not walking in the ways of God, do not belong to the ‘assembly of the righteous’. Also, note the contrast that those who metaphorically sat and ‘mocked’ (v. 1) will not be able to metaphorically stand in the day of judgement. The righteous are noted as blessed, happy and delighting in the law and instruction of God which will yield much fruit (v. 3). At some point in the believer’s life, what we learn and study must be put into practice for the fruit to flourish. The psalm concludes by reminding the worshiper that the Lord watches over the ways of the righteous, that is, those who seek to act in the ways of God, thus reflecting his love and character.

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8. Most of us want to make wise choices in our lives. Learning things the hard way is usually not an enjoyable experience nor something we desire to repeat too often. In response, our culture has produced a lot of self-help material and therapy television shows in the guise of wisdom. Yet in all of our search around the world for it, in the end, James says wisdom is not found dwelling on earth. True wisdom comes from heaven. James urges the community to ‘show their good life through works done in gentleness born of wisdom’. Real wisdom is not head knowledge but instead, like faith, is something expressed through conduct and behaviour. James notes seven qualities that wisdom produces, and they are all types of behaviour. Some of them, such as gentleness and peace, are also in Paul’s list of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23).

Mark 9:30-37. With his face firmly set to meet his destiny in Jerusalem, Jesus and his followers travel south through the Galilee. Instead of teaching and healing openly, as he has done in the past, Jesus uses the time to teach his disciples privately.

Jewish tradition has a long history of religious figures who suffer. The majority of the prophets suffer, including John the Baptist, the martyrs of the Maccabean wars against the Greeks, and even the Dead Sea community. This painful history produces an awareness of redemptive suffering. For example, a suffering messiah is recorded in the writings of the Dead Sea community. Despite this tradition and history, the disciples did not seem to process what Jesus was teaching. We might wonder why not, as Jesus seems to have been speaking quite plainly. This is also not the first time he has taught concerning his fate in Jerusalem (Mark 8:31). We have the benefit of hindsight and read the Scriptures in the light of the resurrection.

Jesus uses the term ‘Son of Man’ to describe himself. This eschatological character from the book of Daniel is presented as powerful and divine whose kingdom is established forever, so it is understandable that the disciples probably still expected a political redeemer and not the suffering messiah. Perhaps the disciples were now expecting Jesus to defeat the Romans in Jerusalem in some miraculous uprising. As such, they argued over who would be more worthy to rule in the messianic kingdom soon to be established. Then they are somewhat embarrassed and remain silent when Jesus asks why they were arguing.

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Jesus sits down to teach, which was the Jewish tradition at the time, thus the disciples know they are about to hear something very important from their master. The disciples had been arguing over who was the greatest, and the answer to that question is obviously Jesus! He is the greatest. Jesus does not do away with the concept of greatness or of being great. Instead, the idea of being great is remoulded away from power and selfish ambition. Jesus says that those who are great are actually the last (the first shall be last) and the great also serve, not desiring to be served. In the messianic kingdom to be established by Jesus, the greatest of characteristics will be humility, love, faithfulness, gentleness and care for the lowly and poor. Jesus brings the example of a child. We are encouraged to serve those who have little status in the eyes of the world; there is also a reward for doing so. Receiving a child is as receiving the Lord; through serving each other we deepen a personal relationship with the Father. This is the wisdom of heaven.

ACNA Addendum

Wisdom of Solomon 1:16-2:1, 12-22. On occasion, the lectionary includes texts from the Apocrypha. Apocryphal books are not included in the Hebrew Bible, but they are in the Septuagint and Latin versions of the Old Testament. Thus their usage in Christian tradition is somewhat ambiguous and is often based upon the history of the denomination. The Wisdom of Solomon is a late Second Temple Period work, not written by Solomon, and appeared several generations before Jesus. These texts give us a glimpse into the theology of the world of Jesus. According to Article 6 of the 39 Articles of Religion, the apocryphal books are not considered canonical but their reading is useful for example of life and instruction.

Like in Psalm 1, we see the contrast between the ungodly and the righteous. The ungodly have no belief in the afterlife and see death as the end of all things. Their self-defined morality and behaviour reflect their nihilistic view. This view is opposed by the righteous, who actually speak the truth and call sin for what it is. Verse 13 notes that the righteous possess the knowledge of God, and it is this wisdom and belief in life after death that motivates their righteous behaviour. For the believer, the end is not final nor unhappy, and as verse 15 notes, ‘The manner of his life is unlike that of others’. The ungodly are threatened by this belief and react with persecution and violence.

Unfortunately, the situation has not changed in the modern era. The secular world is not comfortable with the Christian worldview. Perhaps this is because they don’t like the moral restraints implied by faith and ‘God’s laws’. Perhaps the antagonism against the household of faith betrays that deep down the secular world is actually not confident that God does not exist. Maybe when the ungodly encounter the righteous they are confronted with the reality that perhaps it is the ungodly who are suppressing the truth.

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Psalm 54. This very personal psalm of David is addressed to the ‘Choirmaster’ or the ‘Chief Musician’, depending on your translation of מְנַחֵם (l'*menasach*). We do not know the identity of the Chief Musician, and it could easily be a poetic reference for God (although David does know how to address God directly as he does so many times in his prayers). The introduction notes the context of the psalm’s creation: the betrayal of David to King Saul by the Ziphites (1 Sam 23). The psalm is a personal lament of David as he seeks God’s help against evil men who desire his life. David calls the Ziphites ‘strangers’ in verse 3, though the Ziphites are Israelites, even from the tribe of Judah. What makes them strange and a stranger to David is their behaviour. They are betraying one of their own and acting against the intentions of God. God had anointed David to be king, so their betrayal of David was also a betrayal of the Lord. You can hear the echo of the warning of Jesus in Matthew 25 saying, ‘I never knew you’. David looks to God for help and salvation, and he is confident that God will indeed rescue and take vengeance on his enemies. This confidence is something we can all pray into when faced with persecution. David concludes his psalm with the correct response to the redemption of the Lord. David will bring both sacrifice and praise to the Lord. Both are freewill responses to what God has done.

About the author. The Rev. Aaron Eime is the deacon at Christ Church Jerusalem and teacher for CMJ Israel. Aaron studied in the master’s program at Hebrew University with a focus on early Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Bible. He also studied psychology and sociology at Queensland University in Australia. Aaron is a dedicated Bible teacher exploring the Hebraic roots of the Christian faith. He reads Aramaic and ancient Greek and is fluent in German and Hebrew. He has taught internationally, including in Europe, North America, Hong Kong, and China. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and three children.