

Last week, because of harvest we missed a good chapter, Ezekiel 37 in which was a vision of God's breath, the wind, the "Ruach" of God blowing down the valley into the dry bones that were the remnant of Israel.

"Ruach", wind, breath, is a metaphor for the Spirit of God, his Holy Spirit, who gives life to the people of God.

We have now moved into the early part of the book of Proverbs, and here there is another metaphor for God "Sophia", Wisdom, like a person who seeks to indwell God's people and makes them wise in the things of God.

In the Bible, in Proverbs particularly, much is made of the contrast between "Wisdom" and "Foolishness".

And because "Wisdom", "Sophia", is used almost as a name for God it has a moral connotation.

The Wise man and the Foolish man, are in fact the godly man, and the immoral man.

And Wisdom leads not just to understanding of the things of God, but doing them.

So Wisdom is the path that leads also to health and happiness.

My son, do not forget my teaching
We are called Children of God

proper 23
(Trinity 16)

Proverbs 3. 1 – 18
1 John 3. 1 – 15

Proverbs 1 sets out an appeal to embrace Wisdom and warnings against rejecting Wisdom.

Proverbs 1. 20

Wisdom calls aloud in the streets

...

makes Wisdom almost into the voice of God and so equates her with the Word of God.

Sophia "Wisdom", seems to be the Holy Spirit of God and Logos "Word", seems to be the Son of God.

And they have the same message.

And so, of course, the wise teacher, exhorts his pupils to get Wisdom, to follow the way of Wisdom, and so to find happiness and blessing, all that God would have us enjoy.

The Wise Teacher calls his pupil, "My Son" and so chapter 3 begins

*My son, do not forget my teaching,
but keep my commands in your heart,
for they will prolong your life many years
and bring you prosperity.*

There is a misunderstanding here, about prosperity, in the minds of the Old Testament writers which has been picked up by certain erroneous American sects. They confuse the things of this world with the things of the next.

Proverbs talks of prosperity
when it means treasure in heaven.

Proverbs talks of long life
when it means eternal life.

Proverbs talks of health
when it means peace with God.

Whatever you hear taught at Grapevine or New Life
by loud American prophets
believe me

obedience to God, respect for his laws
will not guarantee you a swelling bank balance
nor a bill of good health
nor survival into your nineties or beyond

But it is the path to a good relationship with God
which will bring you peace and blessing
in this life and the next.
And that path of peace and blessing
may well be a rocky road, or even a short one in this life.

A simple life, even poverty, and possibly martyrdom,
are marks of God's blessing, not his dereliction.
Look at Jesus.

So we see, as the writer unpacks his theme
that the bumper harvest he promises
is in fact the fruit of the Spirit.

verse 3

*Let love and faithfulness never leave you
bind them around your neck.
write them on the tablet of your heart.*

The result - verse 4 - not material comfort, but
*then you will win good favour and a good name
in the sight of God and of man.*

If you want to make a fortune in worldly terms following God's way of wisdom is not the route to follow. As Jesus says, you cannot serve God and Mammon, you cannot pursue godliness and wealth.

And that goes against the grain in this commercially orientated world. Because Money is everything all this doesn't make sense. As a boy I was taught "money won't make you happy" and I thought "yes it would". It would certainly help.

Now I understand what was meant - but to acquire some of that wisdom. I had to unlearn some of what made sense to me as a child.

verses 5 and 6 - these are classic verses and some of you may well have been required to learn them when you were younger - it did not harm.

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding;
in all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make your paths straight.*

"lean not on your own understanding" to be "godly wise" you have to unlearn some of what we might call "worldly wise".

verses 7 and 8 - more godly wisdom

Do not be wise in your own eyes;

fear the Lord and shun evil.

This will bring health to your body

and nourishment to your bones.

You know that good people get ill sometimes.

Even Saint Paul had a "thorn in his flesh,"

a physical ailment which God would not heal.

Sometimes God does heal, and brings "health to your bodies"

but he doesn't guarantee it - it is a gift when God chooses.

He does promise a health, a wholeness,

that transcends the grave.

And with that perspective

I find Proverbs exciting, encouraging, and so true.

Verses 9 & 10 encourage us to tithe.

Honour the LORD with your wealth,

with the firstfruits of all your crops;

then your barns will be filled to overflowing,

and your vats will brim over with new wine.

Do it!

Not to fill your barns, but because it is a good thing to do.

Verse 11 & 12 remind us - using the metaphor of God as Father that God disciplines us, because he loves us.

If God rebukes you - rejoice - he loves you.

If the preacher rebukes you - rejoice just the same!

It is a sign of God's fatherly love.

Don't let the gossip of those who think themselves perfect put you off.

My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline

and do not resent his rebuke.

Because the Lord disciplines those he loves

as a father the son he delights in.

And the last verses of this section 13 - 18 again present "Wisdom" as a person - a lady. And puts worldly measures into perspective.

*She is more profitable than silver
and yields better returns than gold.*

she offers paths of peace, tree of life, blessing.

The next two verses, 19 and 20 show how this "Wisdom" person also called "understanding" and "knowledge" is part of the Trinity, there at Creation, sharing in the work of God as did the Word of God and the Spirit of God.

*By wisdom, the Lord laid the earth's foundations
by understanding he set the heavens in place
by his knowledge the deeps were divided
and the clouds let drop the dew.*

This "Wisdom" is a lovely lady - she is part of the Creator God She could be the Spirit of God, she could be the Son of God Whoever she is - she is worth knowing.

I love this part of Proverbs.

But we must move on to 1 John. John's first letter.

It is packed full of good stuff too much for us to take it all in, in one go.

Like the writer of Proverbs, the Wise Teacher,
Wise old man John sees his disciples as his children.

1 John 2. 1

My dear children ...

2. 18 and 2. 28

dear children ...

Now in chapter 3 - he comes round to reminding them
that just as John loves them as a father
God in heaven loves them infinitely more so

They are Children of God.

Not just because they are made in God's image
true of every human being
but because they have allowed the Holy Spirit
to begin to restore that image.

They are Christians, striving to live lives pleasing to God.

so the previous verse, introducing this passage

1 John 2. 29

*... you know that everyone
who does what is right
has been born of him.*

Who are the "born-again"?

Those who are seeking to live "right" (John's language)

those who follow the Way of Wisdom

(the language of Proverbs)

And John is lifted by God's Spirit
to this great revelation - that we are loved by God.

1 John 3. 1

*How great is the love the Father
has lavished on us
that we should be called children of God.
For that is what we are!*

And he goes on with the same sort of theme
as the Wise Teacher in Proverbs.

If you want to be right with God
If you want to receive the blessings of being Children of God
then you gotta do right!

Jesus took away sin - verse 5
So no-one who lives in him will keep on sinning.

How do you define righteousness
For John it is simple - verse 7
He who does what is right - is righteous.

And verse 10 - quite starkly
*This is how we know
who the children of God are
and who the children of the Devil are:
Anyone who does not do what is right
is not a child of God;
nor is anyone who does not love his brother.*

Now again - do not get mislead.

We understand Scripture by using other Scripture.

John is not saying we are justified, made righteous,
by our good deeds.

This was God's love lavished upon us.
not something we earnt.

He is saying - if we have been received by God
to be part of his new family - made Children of God
(That is what we are!)

Then changes will happen - we will bear fruit
in Paul's language - (Galatians 5)
we will begin to crucify the works of the flesh
and we will begin to grow the fruit of the Spirit.

Good Works is not the way we become "born again"
but if we are "born again" - Good Works will follow.
Because - Paul - we walk in step with the Spirit
because - Proverbs - we follow the way of Wisdom
because - John - we do right.

So in the mature Christian
although we still sin -
we are not perfect this side of the grave
(John says that in chapter 1. 8

*If we claim to be without sin
we deceive ourselves
and the truth is not in us.)*

Yet we do not persist in sinning.

We go to God - confess - and seek help to change.

The life of the Christian should show progress.

We become less bitter - and more loving.

This is really encouraging.

It says that the Christian life is not just about going to church and having a good time.

It starts like that - and is really good.
But if that is all there is - it will get boring.

There are changes in us
that show in everyday life.
that show in family life.
that ought to show in church life.

And so life becomes more exciting.

It means also that life becomes more challenging more difficult - not easier as you move on.
And some people fail to meet those challenges.

But if we press on with Jesus -
he equips us - like an athlete in training -
to cope with the harder tasks.
Even to face battles - and come out victorious.

We face battles all the time
in our church's mission - in our church's life.

If you stand firm - do what is right -
we will survive - and more than survive
we shall be victorious and move on - eventually.

Not without cost - not without pain.
But the church and the kingdom will grow and will prevail.

That is God's promise!