

SERMON – 31/5/26**'The Fruit of the Spirit'**

James 3:13-18

"Are there any of you who are wise and understanding? You are to prove it by your good life, by your good deeds performed with humility and wisdom." (James 3:13)

In the opening chapters of the OT Book of Proverbs there is an elusive character called Wisdom. She calls aloud in the streets and raises her voice in public squares; she rebukes, she warns, she points people in the right path. Presumably she is not an actual individual – rather she represents the voice of God, speaking prudence and knowledge and discernment into all kinds of different situations. She is heard in the words of many different people – family, friends, teachers, strangers; she is heard in the twinge of conscience; and she is heard in the quiet place of prayer.

Have you ever noticed how quick people can be to offer you advice when you are in a mess? Everyone has plenty to say when you are struggling. And we have probably all been that wise counsellor at times, throwing in our ha'penny worth of good advice. But how are we to tell when it is God's wisdom that is being spoken rather than the wisdom of this world? We may think we have something wise to say when we are advising someone else but it's an altogether different matter when we are looking for guidance for ourselves. Wisdom is not only an elusive character in the Book of Proverbs – it can be quite hard to pin her down even today!

We would probably say that some people are wiser than others. But who are the wise? What are the qualities that characterise wisdom? We might call someone 'wise' who is very learned: they are well-read and they have a sharp mind that can easily eclipse our ability to process knowledge. But is intellectual ability what we need when we are seeking the will of God? Alternatively, we might call someone 'wise' who is well-on in years and whose experience may have something to offer us when we seek counsel. But again, can we say that the voice of experience is

always synonymous with the voice of God? The Bible tells us that true wisdom begins with the 'fear of the Lord' – not fear in the sense of terror, but a healthy reverence and respect for the One we acknowledge to be the author of all that is right and good, the origin of all true wisdom. So much of the world's wisdom is turned to selfish ends – even the wisest friend and counsellor can have his or her own interests at heart; people store up wisdom and insight and knowledge only to hide it away from their rivals; greater and greater schemes are dreamed up to advance personal profit no matter what the cost may be to others or to the planet or even to their own well-being. So often God's gift of wisdom can be abused. So where, then, are we to find true wisdom from God?

There is an extremely strong thread running through the Old Testament that is known as the wisdom tradition. It includes the Psalms, many of which are reflections on the nature of human life, its struggles and joys, in the context of a personal walk with God. There is also the Book of Proverbs where you will find everything from thought-provoking sayings ("better a meal of vegetables where there is love than a fattened calf with hatred") to good humour ("a quarrelsome wife is like a constant dripping")! Within the Wisdom literature of the OT we also find the Song of Songs, an exploration of love and relationships, human and divine, and the Book of Ecclesiastes with its memorable sayings: "there is a time for everything and a season for everything under heaven; there is nothing new under the sun; meaningless, meaningless, all is meaningless." But the Wisdom tradition is about a whole lot more than wise or beautiful words. In Proverbs, as I've said, Wisdom is personified and she says: "The Lord brought me forth as the first of His works, before His deeds of old; I was appointed from eternity, from the beginning, before the world began." Those are powerful words that lead us straight into the New Testament and the majestic opening of John's Gospel - "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. Through Him all things were made and without Him nothing was made that has been made... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth." When we hear the voice of Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs, we cannot help but hear the voice of Jesus, the Word of God incarnate

sounding through it. Where better, then, to seek true wisdom than in Jesus Christ? And that's where many of the NT writers seek to lead us – the teaching of Jesus recorded for us in the Gospels, the example of the early church passed on to us in the Book of Acts, and the exhortations of the apostles written for us in their Letters.

In those short verses that we read earlier from the Letter of James, the apostle draws a clear distinction between earthly wisdom and heavenly wisdom. Worldly wisdom, he writes, is of the mind rather than of the spirit and, he suggests, it is characterised by jealousy, selfishness, disorder and every kind of evil – a pretty strong accusation to level, until you stop to think about the way even the most intelligent people can get into the most ridiculous disputes or the way even the most gifted individuals can turn their talents to criminal pursuits. The way of worldly wisdom, like the way of everything in this transitory life leads relentlessly to the grave. What a contrast, then, when James speaks about the wisdom that comes from heaven, wisdom that is “pure first of all, also peaceful, gentle, and friendly; full of compassion and produces a harvest of good deeds; free from prejudice and hypocrisy.” (v.17)

Given what I have just been saying, it should not surprise us in the least that this description could be applied directly to the Lord Jesus Christ. He is above all pure – tempted in every way as we are yet without sin; He is peaceful – the peacemaker who reconciles people to each other by reconciling us to God; He is compassionate beyond measure – just think how patient and wonderfully kind He is to you and me. And we could go on – Jesus, the Word of God made flesh is the Wisdom of God lived out, our supreme example.

And that is the key, I think, to the message of this passage for us today. “Which of you is wise and understanding?” he asks. “You are to prove it by your good life, by your good deeds performed with humility and wisdom.” (v.13) The challenge that we all face is not only to make the right choice – heavenly wisdom rather than earthly – but, as we have seen again and again in this letter, not only to take on board the theory but to live out that choice.

We don't need to look far to spot the differences between the ways of the world and the ways of God, between the material and the spiritual, between our innate human nature and the new life of the Spirit. Even the very best that we human beings can muster (and don't let's deny there is so much good in the world) but it pales into insignificance compared to what God offers us in the self-giving of Jesus. There is a great deal of wisdom to draw on from the pool well of human knowledge and experience. But too often it is tainted by envy and ambition and the things that tend towards disorder and evil. If we are to find true wisdom we need to take that leap of faith into the realm of the Spirit of God; we need to look to Jesus, the eternal Word of God made flesh and the eternal Wisdom of God, the craftsman at the Father's side in the work of creation who humbled Himself to be a carpenter's Son from Nazareth, the Son of God who did not consider equality with God something to be grasped but made Himself nothing and became obedient to death, even death on a cross. To the world's way of thinking it is sheer nonsense – as Paul writes to the Corinthians, “Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who God has called, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.” (1 Cor.1:22-25)

I hold before you a choice this morning – an intellectual choice between earthly and heavenly wisdom. Are we going to go with this world's flow and give in to those things that James says are the fruits of earthly wisdom: envy, selfish ambition, disorder and evil practice? Or are we going to choose the heavenly way that produces a harvest of righteousness, what Paul in his letter to the Galatians calls the Fruit of the Spirit? But I also hold before you a choice of lifestyle. It's not enough to sign up to the way of heavenly wisdom in theory; it's not enough just to profess faith in Christ, to be baptised, to attend worship. Practically, in the hurly-burly of everyday life we have to choose to *exercise* heavenly wisdom, humbly to let the Holy Spirit of Christ guide our feet moment by moment in the way of purity and peace, the way of considerate submission, the way of mercy and good fruit, the way of impartiality and sincerity. Just as by nature we allow earthly

wisdom to direct our paths, even seeking it out at times among learned teachers or experienced counsellors, so by faith we need to allow heavenly wisdom to prompt our thoughts, our words and our actions, heeding the still, small voice of Jesus amidst all the noise and bustle.

The Wisdom of God, who existed before all things and was the craftsman at the Father's side in the work of creation, became a human being and walked among us in staggering humility, embodying the shalom of God that is peace, integrity and wholeness, and living out perfectly the way of God. That is what each of us is called to in Christ, hearing *and* doing, faith *and* action, the fruit of the Spirit.

"Are there any of you who are wise and understanding? You are to prove it by your good life, by your good deeds performed with humility and wisdom."

What is that going to look like for you and me this week?