

## PROVER 15

### Proverbs 9:1-6

<sup>1</sup>Wisdom has built her house,  
she has hewn her seven pillars.  
<sup>2</sup>She has slaughtered her animals, she has mixed her wine,  
she has also set her table.  
<sup>3</sup>She has sent out her servant-girls, she calls  
from the highest places in the town,  
<sup>4</sup>“You that are simple, turn in here!”  
To those without sense she says,  
<sup>5</sup>“Come, eat of my bread  
and drink of the wine I have mixed.  
<sup>6</sup>Lay aside immaturity, and live,  
and walk in the way of insight.”

Meet Wisdom – the hidden woman!

Wisdom Literature is to be found throughout the Old Testament – and I’ll say in a moment what I think Wisdom Literature is about. But in the meantime, let me tell you that Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs are – along with some other books in the Apocrypha – the places where we find Wisdom teaching. And not only there, but also in many of the Psalms, in some of the teaching of Jesus and in the Epistle of James.

What is wisdom writing about. Well, it is really an approach to life, a way of looking at the world and, for Israelites, a way of living out in very deliberate, rational ways their commitment to God. While Wisdom's roots go back to the early days of Israelite history, it began to flower in the latter part of the Old Testament period, and flourished in the Intertestamental period and the era of the New Testament (400 BC to AD 100).

The wisdom perspectives did not replace the other two major strands of thought in Ancient Israel, that of prophets and priests. It was simply a different focus that was complementary with the other perspectives. While it is easy for us to assume in reading the historical accounts of Samuel of Kings, or the prophetic writings of Amos or Jeremiah, that Israel lived in constant crisis. Yet, if we stop and think about the time span of the major upheavals in Israel's history, there were many periods of several generations at a time where there was no crisis. During those times there was not great prophetic voice booming "thus says the Lord." There was just the daily routine of life that preoccupied most of the ordinary people of the land with the mundane questions of how to get along in life.

They were simple questions of living: how to discipline an unruly child, how to teach children what they need to know to survive as an adult, the dangers to the community of gossip and slander, the need for hard work and providing the necessities of life, why wicked people seem to prosper, the arrogance of sudden wealth. These are all life questions that most of us face today in the course of living. To realize that ancient Israelites faced these same questions, and grappled with them rationally from the perspective of experience and community wisdom, may say more to us today as modern Christians than we are used to hearing. Perhaps listening carefully to the Wisdom traditions as Scripture may help us bring an "earthy" balance to our tendency to be preoccupied with the metaphysical and the supernatural as a way to live life daily.

But wisdom represents something of a challenge too to patriarchal Judaism. It seems to me that there were two distinct learning environments for – say – the Jewish child. This might be slightly generalised – but with, I think, truth in it. There was what your father taught you – that

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was laid down and prescribed very heavily by the Torah – it is set out in Leviticus and in many other places. The father is to teach the child the fear of the Lord, and how to walk in the Lord's ways. The Law and worship, the patriarchal histories – they are all there to be hammered home as and when they could. This was the tradition of priests and prophets. The other learning platform was the mother's job. This could almost be seen as subversive, because it was in the area of wisdom - about the community, the family and about the good sense of living. Till recent times, the Wisdom Literature had been a relatively neglected area in the biblical research. As noted above, the absence of the significant OT themes and the lack of revelatory function have led the scholars to consider the Wisdom Tradition as an outsider to the main core of the 'Salvation History' scheme of the Old Testament. This kind of situation is reflected, as one writer refers to Wisdom as 'an orphan'

And yet Wisdom was concerned with the issues that face the human being. The prophetic and priestly tradition wanted to talk about God being revealed in conquest, in battle, in the palaces of kings. Wisdom wanted to talk about how to raise children, provide economic security, care for each other.

The goal of wisdom is harmonious relationships – with God, with others, with the world we live in. Wisdom is interested in how we are. Wisdom is a gentler, more enquiring, more attuned way of being.

So what are we to make of this OT figure we call Lady Wisdom. She is, after all the hidden woman. She is very important to Christian mystics – and yet in our dourish Scottish Calvinism has no place to be heard. She appears often in the shadows. She stands at the crossroads. And in this passage she invites the simple to a feast – a well-known motif in the Christian faith – almost an indicator to us that this Lady Wisdom might be more than we know or expect to find in the by-ways of the Old Testament.

Many of us hold a very simple concept of the Trinity: God the Father is the Creator, the Son is the Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit is the Being "who proceeds from the Father and Son" as the creeds declare. Christ, however, is far more encompassing than that. The Scriptures declare Him to be the Creator, so it is fitting for Him to also be the redeemer of His creation. "*In the beginning was the LOGOS – the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made*" (John 1:1-3). "*For by him [Christ] all things were created; things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together*" (Colossians 1:16-17).

Because the human mind and bodily senses are so inadequate in comprehension of mysteries, we have to create images as a "handle" on reality. Thus we have Lady Wisdom, the feminine counterpart of Christ. (St. Francis espoused the image of Lady Poverty, also a feminine aspect of Christ.)

Christ was incarnated as a male, only one of two choices. As a Spirit, He, like the angels, does not have a gender. While some still can't help seeing the three Persons of the Trinity as male, they are really and truly without gender. The Proverbs make a great case for the existence of Lady Wisdom. Since such a lady is not a fourth person of the Trinity, she is the Christ. In His infiniteness, Christ cannot be bound by images of gender or personhood or function. He is Spirit. "It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God" (1 Corinthians 1:30a).

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Wisdom – the hidden woman? More like “Wisdom – the hidden person of God”.

This might seem to you to verge on the heretical. Well, at one time people were burned at the stake for less. But think about it carefully – what is God saying to us in revealing the figure of this woman who stands at the crossroads, who invites the simple to her feast. This is personified wisdom – and it is inevitably obvious – and indeed stated again and again in scripture – that this is the wisdom of God.

In other words, here we meet face to face with God, but this is the feminine nature of God.

Personified wisdom invites her guests to a lush banquet. Her invitation is open to all, but also encourages dramatic change: forsake foolishness and live! The slogan "God loves us unconditionally" is only half right. God loves us with the expectation and hope that love will transform us into believing and righteous people.

The last couple of weeks in the lectionary have not been helpful in our view of women in God's great economy. Two weeks ago we found ourselves in Ephesus – the home of the goddess Diana of the Ephesians – last week we were looking at Jezebel through the eyes of the Jewish patriarchal writers. She came out as negative, against God in effect. These images of women are written in such a way as to make them appear against – anti-God.

And here today we come across a personification of God in feminine form. What does it mean for us, and for our community-life as Christians.

It takes no great historical analysis to understand that for centuries the church worked hard to suppress the feminine. A God who was Father, Son and Spirit. A leadership that only recognised men as having been apostles, and certainly only recognised men as being fit for leadership within God's church. It was that mind-set that depressed and deprived women from roles within the church. And I who have lived through the first ordinations of women, am the first to admit that even those great steps did not address some of our deepest held prejudices. Just step 20 years ago in the great Assemblies of our churches and here the special tone of deprecation that came into play when “women's work” reports were brought. Just look at the ways in which separate women's organisations often became subtly alternative power sources to divert the energy of women away from where the real, decision-making was to take place. No, the church has often failed and got it wrong.

No surprise, then, that through the centuries – Mary was given her own special place on one side – venerated, but kept separate. No surprise that Lady Wisdom was suppressed as a figure, and allowed to become our forgotten woman of the Old Testament story.

What will be our response? As a community we do try to create a true community of women and men under God. But we always need to be aware and vigilant. The God who is expressed in so many wonderful and varied ways, the God who loves us equally, and shows us mercy equally, is the same God who calls us to demonstrate that in God there is no male nor female, no bond nor free.

What an amazing, varied calling we share! May God grant us the grace to enjoy each other – co-workers as we are in the realm of God's grace!