

Sermon for Christ Church Cathedral

Sunday 16 August 2015

Prov. 9:1-6; Ps 34:9-14; Eph. 5.15-20; John 6:51-58.

The beautiful poetry from the Book of Proverbs that we heard in our first reading comes from a tradition of depicting the Wisdom of God as a feminine figure. This probably began as a way of encouraging young men to persevere in their studies of Torah. Some sages even compared the quest for wisdom with a courtship (Wisd. 8:2; Sir. 15:2). The long hard graft of learning Hebrew verbs might seem more tolerable to a young man if the reward was a beautiful bride coming to live with him as his companion and helper. The image of Wisdom inviting people to her banquet would have had particular appeal. We all know how students gravitate towards free food, especially the hetero-sexual male of the species when the invitations are being handed out by attractive young women.

So who is this Wisdom figure who sends out her servant-girls to invite anyone without sense to come and eat? The biblical writers would say that she is plainly to be seen in the beauty and complexity of the created world. We all know about the legendary wisdom of Solomon. King Solomon was wise, the Bible says, because he could speak about trees, from the cedar that is in the Lebanon to the hyssop that grows in the wall; he would speak of animals, and birds, and reptiles, and fish' and people came from all over the world to hear him (1 Kgs 4:33-34). It was seeing the creation as evidence for the Creator's wisdom that inspired the sages of Israel to think of that Wisdom in personal terms. If it was "with wisdom" that God had produced the "manifold works" of creation (Ps. 104:24), then Wisdom could be imagined as a skilled craftswoman working at God's side, as the skies, the land, the seas and the foundations of the earth were established, "rejoicing in [God's] inhabited world and delighting in humankind" (Prov 8:27-31). As the sages thought about God sustaining the creation in being, they envisaged Lady Wisdom, continually active in the life processes of the Earth, "[reaching] mightily from one end of the earth to the other, [ordering] all things well" (Wisd. 8:1). As they thought about their role, to till the garden of the earth and care for it, they knew that if they prayed for Wisdom, God would send her to work with them and guide them wisely in all their actions. (Wisd. 9. 10-11). Something that we today need to ask God for, considering how unwisely we of the global North have treated our earth home in recent centuries!

Eventually the idea that if people pray for Wisdom God will send her to them developed into a story about Wisdom searching for somewhere on earth to live and God telling her to pitch her tent in Israel. So Wisdom comes among humankind, especially through the gift of the Law that teaches people how to live wisely (Sir 24:8-12). Today's gospel reading comes from a group of believers who see in the arrival of Jesus the definitive entry of this Wisdom figure into the world. So when Jesus invites people to come and eat his bread we are meant to notice how similar he sounds to Wisdom saying, 'Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine that I have mixed.'

The early believers in Jesus knew Wisdom as Sophia—a woman’s name. One of the most historic Christian buildings is *Hagia Sophia*, Holy Wisdom, a church in Istanbul that became a mosque and is now a museum. When it was first built, it was dedicated to Christ as the Wisdom of God. To allow Lady Wisdom to shape our image of God, as that title suggests, can be good exercise for the religious imagination. If we look at the front of our service leaflet, we will see the seal of this cathedral. It shows God the Father as an old man seated on a throne, with the crucified Jesus, somewhat out of proportion to him, and the even tinier dove, representing the Holy Spirit, barely visible above the cross. This is a medieval artist’s attempt to express Christian faith; believing three ways in one God: as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. For many people, the old man sitting up in the sky tends to be the predominant image of God, especially the idea that God is watching us all the time, taking note if we put a foot wrong. I remember once being at a meeting of parents, teachers and pupils in preparation for a school trip to Germany. I will never forget the teacher saying to the boys, “I’m not God; I can’t be watching you every moment of this trip.” This is a travesty of the God revealed in the beauty of the creation, in the Scriptures and in Jesus.

When Wisdom calls us to her banquet today, it is an invitation to us to say, ‘This is what God is like.’ Of course, whatever we might think or imagine about God will always be an analogy, based on our human experience. Even our most perceptive insights are true only to a point and must always be counter-balanced by an opposite perspective. So while God is Father, God is also mother. While God might often be portrayed as a husband in the Scriptures, God as Wisdom can also be a bride. While God can be imagined as the male head of a household who provides for all that live in it, God is also the woman of the house—the *Bean an Ti*. But, of course, the mystery of God, beyond all human capacity to imagine is none of these! No one has ever seen God, but, happily for us, Jesus has explained God to us. And today he assumes the mantle of Lady Wisdom, as it were, and says, ‘Come, eat of my bread and drink of my wine.’

I will always remember one time when I was at a eucharist presided over by one of our women priests. It was the natural womanly way that she said, when inviting us to communion, ‘Feed on him in thy heart by faith and thanksgiving.’ There was something of ‘the woman of the house—saying to her family, ‘Come on, eat up!’—about the way she said that, and even something of Divine Wisdom inviting us to her table. It made me so glad that in our day the hospitality of Jesus, the Wisdom of God, can be represented by women as well as men, who, of course, do it beautifully in their own way.

So next time someone invites us for a meal and we arrive to find that they have thought of a creative recipe, bought the best of ingredients, laid the table with the ‘good’ glassware, china and cutlery, and served us fine wines and delicious food, this is a revelation of the Wisdom God. To eat that food and drink that wine is to enjoy God’s provisioning care. That is why we say grace at meals. And to say grace, to give thanks, is to celebrate eucharist.