

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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TRINITY AND WISDOM

26th May 2013

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31

John 16:12-15

Wisdom is something we all would want, if we think about it. No one would choose, surely, to be known as having the reverse of wisdom, which is not ignorance, it is stupidity. And who wants to be known as stupid, unwise? Wisdom is what we often ask for from God: at the beginning of church meetings, in our personal prayers, before we attempt any difficult decision, or before decisions are made by others which we will know will have a profound effect on us or others. We pray for wisdom for our politicians - we should do that often. We pray for wisdom for others when we know that teams of medical personnel are going to make decisions about us or about someone we care about. We know that it is impossible for us to see all ends, we know that our knowledge is incomplete. And we believe that God does not have our limitations.

I have been thinking about this sermon at the General Assembly, where, this year, as much as any other, the commissioners have needed God's wisdom, and no doubt some of us might think that on some issues, they failed to find it. If you think that, or if I do, we have to ask ourselves if we think that God's wisdom is going to be the same as mine, that God thinks, or should think, just as I do. Because if God were always to think just like me, then I wouldn't need his wisdom, would I? As God himself says, in Isaiah, "My thoughts are not your thoughts" God has to think differently from me and you, or he wouldn't be God.

Wisdom is one of God's attributes, one of his qualities, one of his names, one of the ways that we can come into thinking about God, getting better understanding of God, becoming wiser about God.

Thinking about God is what we do week by week as we come to worship. I hope you also do some thinking about God day by day as you go through the days and weeks and months of your life. Today, the Sunday after Pentecost, is traditionally celebrated in the church as Trinity Sunday. Some preachers dread and avoid it and some look forward to it. It is when traditionally we are supposed to explain to our congregations about the doctrine of God, three in one and one in three.

Now, before you go to sleep, let me say that I love the doctrine of the trinity. I think it is wonderful. I find it illuminating and inspiring. Not that I understand it. But it don't need to understand it to find it illuminating and inspiring, just as I don't need to understand or know all about God to love him and be inspired by him. In fact if I did understand all about God he would be a lot less inspiring, as there would be no more to discover. So if I truly understood the doctrine of the trinity, I could feel pleased with myself and my intellect, but I would not be pondering and learning.

So let's have a ponder together. If you ask a couple who have been married for a long time, forty

years maybe or more, about their relationship the chances are that they will tell you something about how nice it is to be with someone who has become so familiar, about whom they know so much, and who knows them so well. But they will also talk of being constantly amazed at how a spouse can surprise them and reveal more of the person they already thought they knew so well. So it is with God. As you go through a life lived in relationship with God, God knows you perfectly. So you can be totally yourself with him. And as you get to know God better, parts of his personality, his care for you maybe, or his standards and plans became quite well known by you. But there is always so much more to discover. Like the iceberg, in our relationship with God we know only the tiny peak and most of God is hidden from us. It is hidden from us, but still there, still relevant, still to be discovered.

And that is where the trinity comes in.

When Jesus walked through Palestine with his chosen disciples he showed them many, many things about himself and about God which had never previously occurred to them. Time and again they had their minds blown by what they saw and heard. There were thousands fed, miracles of healing and raising to life, storms stilled, water walked on. Jesus showed them that God is king and lord of this world as much as heaven. As we said a couple of weeks ago, Jesus was showing that once again earth, God's creation, was becoming his space, his kingdom, just as much as heaven, his other space was.

Even then the disciples were puzzled by what they saw "Who then is this, that even the wind and the waves obey him?" Sometimes they found his radically different way of looking at God and his own place in God's purposes too difficult to take on board; so we see Peter rebuking Jesus for saying that he would be taken by the authorities and put to death. The disciples were being taken from what they already knew of God, a very small tip of the iceberg, and were being shown a little hint of what lay beneath the waves. And Jesus knew that there was only going to be so much that they could take on board, so he promised them that when he left them the Holy Spirit would help them understand more. "He will take what is mine and declare it to you." This began at Pentecost and has been going on ever since.

Ever since the third century Christians have been trying to explain the idea of God being trinity, three in one and one in three. It is a hard thing to do because there is no passage in the Bible that explains it, and very few that even allude to it. But the Bible, Jesus, does talk of God as Father. And Jesus does talk of himself as God's Son, and as being one with the Father, and, as we saw today, he does talk of God's Spirit. It's all about different ways of getting to know someone.

You here today, if you are not a visitor, know me as your minister. Most of you. But in St. Bride's church there are also those who know me as a mother and a wife. And there are some, I hope, who have begun to think that you also know me as a friend. There are certainly people elsewhere in the world who think of me as a friend. Minister, mother, wife, friend - oh, and Presbytery Clerk, patient, cyclist, writer. All sorts of ways of knowing me, and each person who knows me knows me slightly differently, but it is still me they know. My children know me first as mother, because that is the way that it is easiest for them to relate to me. But my dentist, who seems to be seeing a lot of me these days, knows me first as patient. As we keep meeting professionally, we may get to know each other in ways that are less related to my teeth, but that is the way into any relationship we may develop.

So with God. We may know him best as Father, and find that the fatherly side of his nature is the one most familiar to us: the side that is caring and protective, that is wise and forgiving. Or we may know God best through Jesus, known as God the Son: Jesus who shared our humanity and showed God's compassion, who showed his love by dying for us. Or we may come to our knowledge of God

through the Holy Spirit, God speaking within us, God at work in the everyday of our lives, God speaking through Scripture. It's not that we have to choose one way of coming to God, of knowing God, but that whichever way we come to God, we discover when we get there that there is so much more to know.

We also discover, for instance, that there is God as wisdom, wisdom personified, pure wisdom, nothing but wisdom, only wise with nothing foolish about him. St Paul tells us that the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom. That when God acts in a way which we do not understand, and which therefore seems foolish to us, such as when he not only allowed, but planned that Jesus, the Son should come to live and die for us; when we look closer we find that what God is doing is wiser and more profound than we could have planned or imagined.

So many ways to come at God. That is the Trinity. Three of the ways, the three main ways in which God has chosen that human beings should learn to know him, because they are the three main ways in which we are able to understand and relate to him. Most of us, and this is still true although there are sad exceptions, most of us have positive feelings about our fathers. We think of the father-child relationship as good and nurturing and necessary. We think of the parent as knowing better than us, able to guide us and help us grow. And so when we come to God as to a beloved parent, the God we discover is all that any parent could be, and far, far more.

As we explore that more we will come to discover what those who first of all relate to and discover God as Jesus, the Son, have already learned. Which is that God as well as being above us, is beside us. God as Father can, to some, mean that God is remote. But Jesus is not remote. He is real and present and immediate, because he lived and experienced life just as we do: just as we do, taking on not just bodies like ours, with feelings and needs, but also a mind like ours, with limitations of foresight and knowledge.

And as we begin to understand God as being beside us we come to what people who have arrived at truth about and relationship with God as God the Spirit already know: that God is not only above us and beside us but within us and around us. Some of us first of all meet with God as he speaks through Scripture, making the printed or spoken words live with vibrancy and immediacy to our own situations, personally or in wider contexts. Or we first and most immediately encounter God in the voice of conscience. Or we see God's hand first in circumstances in our own lives or the life of the world.

Father, Son and Spirit; three ways of coming into the truth that is God and that is so much bigger than anything we can ever fully know or understand. Three ways of coming to and learning the truth which Jesus said the Spirit would teach us. Three ways of coming at the glory that is God. These may not been the only ways that there are, but they are three ways that God has chosen to reveal himself, because he, who made us, knows that these are ways that we can relate to. If God has given us these models of himself to draw us in, then wisdom insists that we should make use of them. To do anything else would be foolish, unwise.

This is why I love the doctrine of the Trinity, why I find it so illuminating and inspiring. Some people think that it is a doctrine which makes God remote and, being hard to understand, makes a distance between us and God, but I think it brings God close, close to me, to you in ways that are accessible to us, and from which we can delve deeper and deeper into the wonder and unfathomable (which means bottom-less) mystery which is God. And the deeper we delve, the more we can live as his true children, bringing in his kingdom in the world.