

# St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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## WISDOM AND KNOWLEDGE

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Job 28:12-28

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Well, the prelim exams are over in the High School and the results have been calculated and distributed to the exultant or uncomfortable students. They have spent some months studying their various subjects and now their knowledge and understanding of these subjects has been tested. It is a difficult time in a teenager's life, and if the results are not what you hoped they would be, the public way you get back your results can be the hardest part. You have to laugh it off, pretend you don't care, when inside you maybe care very much indeed. Tricky. And although the exam system varies in different places, and although it has changed since most of us here sat our school exams, yet we will remember the feeling of having our knowledge tested. How many of us would want to go back to that stage of life?

If you were one of those who found exams hard and felt that, perhaps through stress or nerves, you weren't able to show the full extent of what you really knew in these tests – whether you sat them last week or fifty years ago – take heart, it doesn't mean that you aren't or can't be wise! Our readings today tell us that wisdom and knowledge are two different things.

Where shall wisdom be found? Asks Job, in the middle of the discussion about why he is suffering so badly. Where is wisdom to be found – he is pretty sure that it is not to be found with his friends, although they have been giving him what was the received wisdom of the day: namely that suffering comes to us as a direct and proportionate result of our doing wrong. And that makes no sense to the suffering, but godly, Job. But if he can't find wisdom from them, where can it be found? The book of Job is mostly written in poetic form, so in pondering this question, we are given some lovely imagery.

Job first of all dismisses the idea that human beings have the key to wisdom: it has got to be better than what we can come up with by ourselves, especially as over the centuries we have repeatedly come up with the idea of sin and suffering being linked as cause and effect. It is not found in the land of the living, nor in the depths of the sea. And then he compares wisdom with all kinds of jewels and precious things: gold and onyx, coral and crystal; none of them can equal wisdom, and it cannot be bought with any of them. Well then, since it is hidden from human eyes, maybe it is found with death, but no. Where is wisdom found?

*"God understands the way to it, and he knows its place.*

*For he looks to the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens.*

*When he gave to the wind its weight, and apportioned out the waters by measure;*

*when he made a decree for the rain, and a way for the thunderbolt;*

*then he saw it and declared it; he established it, and searched it out.*

*And he said to humankind.*

*Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.*

Wisdom is to be found with God, with looking at the world the way that its creator looks – which is taking a long view; which is looking with a creator’s joy and love and tenderness. Wisdom is to be found in the fear of the Lord – which is a phrase and an idea that we do not like! The fear of the Lord! Trembling and quavering and quaking before God’s anger – we saw a bit of that in the prophets, and we did not enjoy it.

But what are the alternatives to the fear of the Lord? One is to treat God as a buddy, as though God were just one like us, meaning that we have no reverence, no respect, to need or desire to please him and put him first. Another alternative is to dismiss the idea of God altogether. If God is to be feared, then I can do without that kind of God. But what kind of a world would it be without God in it? Where would we find our help and strength and yes, our wisdom, then?

In the days of the Old Testament, God was indeed to be feared, for if you did not honour him by keeping his commands – and who could keep them all? – then you might fear retribution. But we should never forget that we are an Easter people, and Hallelujah is our song! We who live on the other side of the cross and resurrection do not have to live with that visceral, paralysing fear of God. Jesus came to give us forgiveness and take away that fear. However, this does not mean that we should do as some of the Christians in Corinth did. There were those in that turbulent church who effectively said “God forgives me now? That’s good because I don’t intend to change a single thing about my life, and in fact I am going to do just whatever takes my fancy.” One of the reasons Paul wrote the letter we read from today was to repudiate that idea. We do not need to quake before God, but neither should we treat him as our divine slave, who has to clean up after us because that’s his job.

Jesus came to take away the fear of the penalties of not honouring God as we should, but that doesn’t mean that we should cease to honour God, to give him our utmost respect. Of course we should. He is still God the creator, the one who planned this world and all the outer reaches of space. He is still God, the one who is perfect in holiness and goodness, and who looks to find that perfection in his creation. He is now also the God who in love sent his Son to live and die for us to save us and give us his own perfection, so that we are able to approach God without fear – not because of anything we are or do ourselves, but because we wear the righteousness of Christ. Surely, out of love and gratitude, even more honour and respect are due him than in the days when people cowered before the very idea of God’s presence.

Wisdom is found in learning to live with honour for God, and that means learning to look at life his way. This was what Paul wanted the people of Corinth to understand. The church at Corinth was in a mess. They plumed themselves for their spiritual gifts, they thought that they were already perfect in righteousness, while some of them practiced immorality, and their celebration of the Lord’s supper left some hungry and some drunk. In his letter, Paul is going to take them to task for a lot of their actions and attitudes, but here at the beginning, he brings them back to first principles, and talks to them about the message of the cross. He reminds them that although they have accepted that Jesus’ crucifixion means forgiveness and life for them, to most people in their world – and, let’s face it, in ours – the message of the cross, that one man’s undeserved death can bring life to the world, is pure foolishness. Foolishness, the opposite of wisdom.

And that is what we have to understand when we seek to live and think in God's way: that God turns human wisdom, the best that we can think of for ourselves, on its head. We think of things like an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, and that seems fair, a way of limiting violence and the urge for revenge. But in Jesus God says *"If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile."* (Matthew 5:39-41) God turns human wisdom on its head. He did not save the world through wise words from scholars or rhetoricians. He saved the world through a man who was his Son dying on a cross. And if that is hard for those who pride themselves on their wisdom to understand, then that shows how far they are from the true and simple wisdom of God.

Paul reminds his readers that God turned things upside down when he called them – them, the Corinthians who thought so much of themselves! He reminds them that although in the church they think a lot of themselves, not many were wise by human standards, not many were in powerful positions, and not many were of noble birth. But God chose them because of that, because they were foolish and weak and lowly, so that his wisdom and grace and glory would not be tangled up with human reasons for pride and boasting.

Wisdom is not the same thing as knowledge. If the Corinthians had been more knowledgeable, more educated in the Greek fashion of education, more used to having people hang from their lips as they dispersed good advice, then God could not have used them – nor could he have used us - to show up the inadequacies in human ways of living and thinking.

We are living in a world which even in the high days of Christendom has never got very far past the idea of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth; the idea of looking out for number one, whether that is as an individual, or a family or a nation. And we are asked to reflect on our calling into God's family. He did not call you or me because we are great and good, because we are intelligent or wise, because we are rich or skilful. We may or may not be any of these things; none of us are all of them and most of us are none of them! God called us into his family because he loved us and his Son has died for us. He loves us just as much if we know a lot or if we know very little – about him, or about the world, or about life. And it is this love without reason and love without limit which he calls us to model. For when we do, we will show his wisdom to the world: a wisdom that knows nothing of boundaries or the idea of being deserving. A wisdom which wants to embrace the whole world.

Realistically consider your call, and remember that it wasn't for anything you might think yourself good at that God called you. And when you see yourself that way, as simply loved without deserving it, then you will come close to viewing the world as God does, as full of people who need to be loved, and then you will come close to his wisdom, for life and beyond it. Amen.