

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

CREATION STEWARDSHIP

16th Sep 2018

Proverbs 1:20-33

Romans 8:18-25

We read today about wisdom calling out to us, calling out to the people of God with the voice of God himself. Wisdom is a version of what we would call common sense. You don't have to have a high IQ to live a wise life, but you do have to think about what you are doing and why. The Bible has a lot to say about wisdom and the book of Proverbs is one of the places where you find it strongly stressed.

In our reading today, we see that Solomon, writing his book, pictures wisdom as a woman (could that be because women have greater common sense? Surely not!). He sees her in the busiest places in the city, at street corners on in the gates, where people gathered to do business. He hears her cry out to people that they should think about how they live and remember that what they do, the decisions that they make, will come back on their own heads in time. So far, so obvious. But she also says that wisdom is to choose the fear of the Lord, to choose to listen to God and obey with respect, believing that God knows better than us. In this passage and in others in this book of Proverbs where the lady wisdom re-appears, we see that Solomon is understanding wisdom as a function of God himself.

In the next three weeks we are going to think about wisdom as we think about stewardship. When you hear the word Stewardship in church, I know what you think, you think "She is going to ask for money." Well, don't you? But in this case, you are wrong. Yes, to run a church we need money, but the stewardship I want us to think about is more important and deeper than that. There is no point in running a church for its own sake, we need to know what we are here for in the wider context, and the stewardship I want us to think about is the way that God gives with all of creation and the way that he wants us to live with his creation as well. Our consideration will culminate in our Harvest Thanksgiving on the last Sunday of September.

We read a short passage from the remarkable chapter which we call Romans 8 today. A chapter which begins with talking about our personal forgiveness and setting free in Christ and which ends with the declaration that since God is for us nothing and no one can stand against us. But, of course, we didn't read either of these better known and glorious passages, we read the bit in the middle, which I think is no less glorious in what it says, but which is a little harder to grasp.

What we read has Paul beginning where the previous thought left off, with the promise that suffering, though often intense, will be far outweighed by the glory that is going to be unveiled for us. For us. That is what the Greek says, although some translations have tried to make things easier by saying "to us" or "in us". But the glory of God is not about us, and we are not spectators of it, it is *for* us. The point of glory is that it means glorious sovereign rule, sharing Jesus' saving rule over the whole world. Living with God's wisdom. And that is what the whole of creation is waiting for. It is waiting for us, for you and me and all God's children to be revealed,

to be seen as God's children and to live as God's children. Then at last creation will know its true rulers, those who have listened to God's wisdom, and will know that the time has come for it to be rescued from corruption.

To understand this even a little, we need to think about the story of creation. When we look at the world of creation as it is in the present, we see a world in the same condition as the people of Israel were in when they were enslaved in Egypt. Just as God allowed the Israelites to go down to Egypt - a short-term solution which led to a long-term problem - so that by bringing them out they could forever be defined as the freedom-from-slavery people, so God has allowed creation to be subjected to its current round of growth and decay, birth and death. It is beautiful, yes, of course it is, and we who live here and who have the autumn colours developing all around us know that as well as anyone can. It is beautiful but it always comes to an end. There is always decay to follow the birth. And when we see what creation can do at its fault-lines, with earthquakes or volcanoes for instance, we see that there is power in it, but it is a futile, directionless power.

What is all this power for? Sometimes we can harness it, but is that why it exists? And what about the promises in Scripture about wolves lying down with lambs? Is that just words?

Paul is saying that no, it isn't just words, but it is in fact a promise. All this random energy and decay and enmity are signs that the world as it is, though still God's good creation, and pregnant with his power and glory, is not at present the way that it should be. God's covenant faithfulness was always about his commitment that, through the promises to Abraham, he would one day put the whole world to rights. Now, in Jesus, we see what he meant. The human race was put in charge of creation - this is told quite firmly in the first chapters of Genesis, and Paul would not forget them. When human beings rebelled and worshipped parts of creation instead of God himself, creation fell into disrepair. That was true back in the ancient times when people worshipped rocks and sacred trees, and it is still true now when worship is often given to the things that we, mining creation for minerals and materials, can make. Because we worship parts of creation, not the creator, creation falls into disrepair.

God allowed that state of slavery to continue, not because the creation wanted to be like that, but because God was determined eventually to put the world back to rights according to the original plan. That plan called for human beings to take our place under God and over the world, worshipping the creator and exercising glorious stewardship over the world. (I told you we were thinking about stewardship.) Creation is waiting to benefit wonderfully when God's children are glorified. It is waiting - on tiptoe with expectation is how Paul puts it - for the particular freedom it will enjoy when God gives to his children that glory, that wise rule and stewardship, which was always intended for those who bear God's glorious image.

And although Paul seems to think that creation is waiting for an apocalyptic event, where God's children are recognised by all of God's creation, yet the words of lady wisdom still come to us today. And they are harsh words, because lady wisdom is simply cause and effect, she is simply an idea of abstract incredulity that people could refuse to think things through and take heed from their conclusions. Because that is what we do. We do not take heed, and in respect to our care for creation, we do not take heed of the many warnings that we have been given.

The church has a lot to repent of in terms of our care of the planet. The idea found first of all in the creation stories, that people were put on the earth to be in charge, has led to an understanding that the earth was made to serve us. And if the earth was made to serve us, then we could do whatever we liked with it. And so Christian churches were not the first to speak up against the pollution of the planet, or the over-use of its resources. But this is not the case. We were given charge over the earth, but this does not mean that it was made to serve us. Rather it means that we were made to look after God's creation.

We have fallen from that wonderful purpose, fallen from the moment we forgot to worship the creator and look to his creation with care, not with greed. And it has always led to disaster. I am not just talking about climate change, but about landslips caused by poor or over-mining – which have been happening for centuries. I am talking about acid rain, but also about the deforestation which began in the West – where is the great Caledonian forest now? - and continues in the last ancient forests of the world.

God calls us to be stewards – stewards of all that we are given, whether that is money or talents or time, but also including the gift of the world which has been given to each of us to care for. We care, we are good stewards, when we tend our farms or our gardens, working with the creator to enhance his work. We are good stewards when we set goals for reducing the amount of destructive chemicals we produce – whether by reducing our driven miles or setting ourselves ever-decreasing targets for the amount of disposable plastic in our lives and our homes. None of this is rocket science, and it is not new advice. So, says lady wisdom, *“How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?”* And as she also says, *“For waywardness kills the simple and the complacency of fools destroys them.”*

God calls us to be stewards of the world that he has given into our care. We are to tend it for him. The Church, this church, all churches, should be at the forefront of doing that, for this is our glory and serves God's plans. So this autumn, challenge yourself, ask what more you can do to care for the world, whether you start from a position of already being active in this area, or whether it is something you have previously shrugged off because it asks you to make changes in your life, there is always something more that we, as wise children of God, can do. Amen.

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