

Sunday 19 February 2006: The Second Sunday before Lent (Creation Sunday)

Where wisdom begins ...

Readings: Proverbs 8:1, 22-31; John 1:1-14

*The LORD created me at the beginning of his work, ... and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.
And the Word became flesh and we have seen his glory.*

An atheist was walking through the woods. He said to himself: "What majestic trees!" "What powerful rivers!" "What beautiful animals!" As he was walking alongside the river, he heard a rustling in the bushes behind him. He turned to look and saw a 7-foot grizzly charge towards him. He ran as fast as he could up the path. He looked over his shoulder and seeing that the bear was closing in on him, he stumbled and fell to the ground. Rolling over, he saw that the bear was right on top of him, reaching for him with his left paw and raising his right paw to strike him. At that instant the Atheist cried out, "Oh my God!!!"

Time Stopped. The bear froze. The forest was silent. As a bright light shone upon the man, a voice came out of the sky. "You deny my existence for all these years, teach others I don't exist and even credit creation to cosmic accident. Do you expect me to help you out of this predicament?"

The atheist looked directly into the light, "It would be hypocritical of me to suddenly ask You to treat me as a Christian now, but perhaps You could make the BEAR a Christian?" "OK" said the voice. The light went out. The sounds of the forest resumed. And the bear dropped his right paw. Then he brought both paws together, bowed his head and spoke: "Lord bless this food, which I am about to receive from thy bounty through Christ our Lord, Amen"

Today, the Second before Lent is sometimes known as Creation Sunday – an opportunity we might think for doing the liturgical equivalent of saying to ourselves "What majestic trees" or even "Lord bless this food" and then going on our way. Luckily our scripture readings will not let us off quite so lightly. They challenge us to take seriously our relationship with creation as that which is God-breathed and spoken into being by the very Word of God. They challenge us to ask what it means to be made in the image of God and to be those in whom the wisdom of God delights. They ask us to take seriously the concept of wisdom as a vital element in our relationship with creation, with God and with one another.

*"Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?"*

wrote T.S. Eliot in one of the choruses of his poem "the Rock". We have more factual information about the nature of the world around than any previous generation. We have the knowledge both to speculate about the origin of life and to project into the future how the world might develop. We know how our choices and lifestyles today can affect future generations. And what we know about that projected future doesn't sound encouraging. Just this week, one study predicted that the by the year 3000, UK could face tropical temperatures and major flooding as water levels rose by over 11m. The rate of melting of the Arctic icecap suggests that the serious impact of global warming and rising water levels will hit us much earlier. By the year 2050, in the lifetime of many people here, there will be a projected 150m climate refugees as countries such as Bangladesh, Egypt, Holland become uninhabitable. We know we are damaging our world; we know the consequences of potential

disaster for future generations. We know but we seem powerless to act because our fragmentary knowledge is not informed by wisdom – and our perception of the world around us is not informed by the gifts of wisdom – open eyes, clear vision and illumined minds.

In the ancient Hebrew tradition, wisdom and creation were bound together in the heart of the community – the Temple. That was where Wisdom dwelt with God, defining and setting the boundaries of creation and imparting her gifts to those whom she anointed.

The Temple itself was modelled on a vision of creation and at its centre stood the Holy of Holies representing day one the place of unity, the throne of God. This was separated from the rest of the Temple by the Veil, representing the material world screening the presence of God from human eyes. To pass through this veil, as was the role of the Anointed High Priest in the worship of the Temple, was to be transformed. The liturgy of the temple was the original green activity – preserving creation and transforming the created order with the active, infectious holiness of the throne of God.

John the evangelist's great leap of faith and insight was to recognise that in the flesh and blood of Jesus the veil that hid the glory of God has been broken down – the Word became flesh and we have seen his glory. In Christ, the anointed one, the Wisdom of God is visible for all to see in the very material of God's creation. I doubt that John ever voted Green or worried about recycling his back copies of Visionary Today, but the opening words of his Gospel are a testimony to the wisdom and creative purposes of God. In Christ the whole created order holds together and finds its meaning and purpose. To be those created in the image of God and to be those in whom the wisdom of God delights is to be in relationship with the whole created order. Christians don't really have an option about being green or not – it's there in the very life-blood of wisdom which flows through us, in the relationships that bind us. And to close our eyes to the wilful or neglectful destruction of creation is to cut ourselves off from the source of life itself.

Today we celebrate the baptism of Hannah Sophia – that very name Sophia the Greek word for wisdom – reminding us of the God who creates us in his image and calls us by name. In her four and a bit years, Hannah's already acquired quite a lot of wisdom through the relationships of love which enfold her – parents, grandparents, sister, cousins, friends.

Today Hannah in your baptism you will find new relationships and new wisdom springing from what appear to be very ordinary bits of God's creation. You'll be anointed with oil – following a tradition where Wisdom herself was the anointing oil as she imparted her gifts. You'll find yourself splashed with water – as the gift of life itself that flowed at the heart of the heavenly temple. But that water will also remind you of the costly nature of God's wisdom – that comes through death and resurrection, through letting go and receiving back. You'll receive the light of the risen Christ to guide your way, a light that will continue to shine even when the darkness threatens to overcome it. And you'll find yourself welcomed into the people of God in this place, and so into that great priesthood of all people to whom God entrusts the care of one another and of the whole created order in love and wisdom.

That's quite a lot of wisdom to swallow in one go, which is why what happens today, Hannah, is just a start. It's the start of a lifetime of seeking to understand where knowledge ends and wisdom begins; of seeking to grow in relationship with the wisdom and word of God made human flesh; of seeking to glimpse and to reveal God's glory in that which appears mundane or ordinary; and in all these things learning each day to rejoice in that whole created order and in being those in whom the wisdom of God delights.