

August 15, 2021

I'm going to jump off today with our first lesson from the Old Testament. It is from the book of Proverbs, and we heard just a minute ago. However the translation from our official source—the one printed in our bulletin—that one is a trifle bland, at least to my taste, and especially in comparison with the one I'm going to read now. The version I'm going to read now is the translation made by Eugene Peterson, someone many of you have heard of. He was a Presbyterian minister, who lived on Flathead Lake, right here in Montana. Eugene Peterson wrote many books and became famous for the way he brought the scriptures to life in plain English. Here is how he translates Proverbs 9: 1-6, the section he calls, "LADY WISDOM GIVES A DINNER PARTY."

*Lady Wisdom has built and furnished her home; it's supported by seven hewn timbers.*

*The banquet meal is ready to be served: lamb roasted, wine poured out, table set with silver and flowers.*

*Having dismissed her serving maids, Lady Wisdom goes to town, stands in a prominent place, and invites everyone within sound of her voice:*

*"Are you confused about life, don't know what's going on?*

*Come with me, oh come, have dinner with me!*

*I've prepared a wonderful spread - fresh baked bread, roast lamb, carefully selected wines.*

*Leave your impoverished confusion and live!*

*Walk up the street to a life with meaning."*

I love this: “Are you confused about life, don't know what's going on? Come with me, oh come, have dinner with me!”

We might now be sure quite what is going on here, or who exactly is talking, but it's lively. This is great stuff! Somebody is inviting us to a feast, a feast of understanding and meaning. Who doesn't like a feast? Who doesn't want to understand and to find meaning? We all do. But who exactly is this, who is inviting us to the feast?

Well, “Lady Wisdom” is the name of our hostess. To speak of “Lady Wisdom” is to personify a mental attribute, the attribute that includes things like insight and understanding. It is to imagine Wisdom itself as being a person. But this is what the Book of Proverbs does. And as for why Wisdom is female, well, all I want to say on that front is that I have known enough really wise women in my time, that it's not surprising that in the Bible, wisdom would be personified as a woman. That part seems quite sensible.

But there are two things that do remain a little puzzling: first, what is Wisdom anyway, and second, why is she described as being alive, a Person who speaks and acts?

What is wisdom? In our culture today we don't talk as much about wisdom as we used to—maybe we have kind of given up on the idea that people really can be wise! But we do have similar concepts, even today. People are very concerned about using our minds well. We say things like “let's be smart about this,” or, “let's use best practices,” or, “education is really

important.” And so forth. So we do have ways of pointing out the importance of good and effective mental activity. So perhaps we could define Wisdom as being all that kind of thing. Wisdom is everything there is about having good ideas, and thinking clearly, and being smart.

But why would “wisdom” be presented as being a person, “Lady Wisdom?” Well, maybe the reason could be that Wisdom is a person! That is certainly the approach that Christianity has taken with this passage. Many theologians have noted the similarity of Wisdom passages in the Old Testament, and some describing Jesus in the New Testament. According to John’s Gospel, Jesus is the Word of God, who was with God from the beginning, the One through whom the cosmos was created. These claims about Jesus are very similar to the way Wisdom is described in the Old Testament. You can see this in chapter 8 of Proverbs, where “Wisdom” tells us she was with God at the Creation and helped design the universe. So perhaps “Lady Wisdom” is somehow a forerunner of, or maybe even the same as, Jesus Christ our Lord. Both are with God from the beginning, both help God create the Cosmos, both “come down from heaven” to invite us to a feast.

And just listen to how similar their words are.

Lady Wisdom says, “Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed.”

Jesus says, "Come to me, all who are weary, and I will give you rest... I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever."

There are other similar passages; what stands out once you notice them is how frequently Jesus uses phrases that, if they were in the Old Testament, we would say, "Lady Wisdom must have said that." Somehow, Jesus the Word of God sounds just like the personified Wisdom of God.

What are to make of this? It's interesting, I guess, but where are we to go with the comparison between Jesus and the Wisdom of God?

Well one place we could go is to the feasts to which they invite us. They make some pretty amazing claims about what will happen if we accept their invitations.

Lady Wisdom promises that if we go to her feast, we will "Leave our impoverished confusion and live!" We will, "Walk up the street to a life with meaning."

Jesus goes her one better. Go to his feast, he says, and partake of his bread and wine, and eternal life is ours. "The one who eats this bread will live forever."

What I get from this is that the important thing for us to do is to accept their invitations. That is the smart thing to do! Dine with the Wisdom of God, and eat with the Word of God, and good things will start to happen.

Let me be as clear as possible. When dealing with God, the order of things makes a difference. The first thing is to accept the invitations that God gives. Come, God says, sit down and let me feed you. We may not understand why we are being invited, or what we are supposed to do when dinner is over, but that's OK. Understanding will follow the feast. First and foremost, let God regale us with spiritual food; our part is to relax and enjoy it. This seems to be God's plan, and since God is the host, it is only polite to accept this way of doing things.

Communion, for example. Clearly Jesus invites us to receive communion. "Do this for the remembrance of me," he says. Do this. Eat this. Drink this. It's as simple as it gets; just do as he says! It is as we continue eating and drinking, that the reasons for it all come slowly into focus. We begin to understand the mind of Christ, as a result of doing what he says, and enjoying the feast he provides.

*"Are you confused about life, don't know what's going on?  
Come with me, oh come, have dinner with me!"*

Is that Jesus talking, or Lady Wisdom? The only possible answer is, "Yes."

And it isn't just communion, by the way. Other activities such as reading the Bible, or learning to pray, are a kind of feast also. As we do them, we grow in grace and understanding. Opportunities for these feasts are part of the regular cycle here too, by the way. Come, and see: Bible every Wednesday at 9:30 AM; prayer two Wednesdays each month at 5:00 PM.

Is it Lady Wisdom inviting us, or is it Jesus? Well, once again, the answer is, “Yes.”

Before closing I want to say a word in honor of another remarkable lady, the one many call, Our Lady, Mary the mother of Jesus. Today, August 15, is the feast day of “St Mary the Virgin.” As Episcopalians, our observance of this day is more modest than that of say, the Roman Catholics or Eastern Orthodox. But we do have it in our prayer book, and I for one am glad of it. Mary was a very discerning woman. She was wise beyond her years. As a very young woman she accepted the invitation of God. She didn’t know everything she was getting into, but she took the plunge anyway, said Yes to God, and the rest is history.

I couldn’t let today pass without some kind of mention of Mary. Our final hymn is in honor of her. The tune may not be super familiar, but it’s quite pretty, so let’s follow her example: take the plunge, sing boldly, and so do our best by the mother of Jesus.

It has turned out then that today is Lady’s day; we have Lady Mary and we have Lady Wisdom to be grateful for. Together, with one voice, they repeat the appeal we have been hearing from God: do the smart thing, they say! Come, eat, find meaning, find life. So: let’s eat!