

Wisdom

Proverbs 8:1, 22-31

Colossian 1:15-21

John 1:1-14

Christians, sometimes, have a tendency to downplay the Old Testament. Often this is for good reason. We are not Jews and the Apostle Paul was very clear that Christians see the world and God in different ways from Jewish people. But any suggestion that there is a kind of cliff-edge division between the Old and the New Testaments is quite mistaken. Over many years I have become aware of the ways in which Jesus is foretold in the Old Testament. And we should always remember that for Jesus himself the Old Testament was all there was – and he held it in great regard. He told his listeners,

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets;
I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.

Matthew 5:17

It was quite characteristic of Jesus to refer to the 'law' and the 'prophets' – these were two of the key components of the scriptures. The Law contained the foundation documents of the Jewish faith: quite literally the law, including the ten commandments, but also the key stories: creation, Noah, Abraham, Moses and the Exodus. These are what we now know as the first five books of the bible.

The Prophets are the books that we might call the historical books: accounts of the rise of the kingdom and their three kings, Saul, David Solomon, and then the long political and military decline in which prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah warned or encouraged their political masters as was appropriate.

But there was a third category of book known often as The Writings or sometimes as The Wisdom Books. These are books where the historical context is less important; and even though they have an historical context they are rarely about historical events. The best known wisdom books are the psalms and some of these are clearly set in the time of

King David. But today we heard from the Book of Proverbs: as the psalms are attributed to King David so are Proverbs attributed to King Solomon. Much of the Book of Proverbs is exactly as described, some profound, some common sense, some quite memorable and some now rather comic:

A gold ring in the snout of a pig

Is a lovely woman who lacks discretion.

Proverbs 1:22

You would not get away with writing that now! There is nothing particularly inspired, or even spiritual about most of the Book of Proverbs.

But that is not true of the extract we have just heard. What we heard was visionary, going well beyond homely advice. It is a depiction of the creation of the world. But what makes this different from, say the account in Genesis, is the presence of this mysterious character called Wisdom. In fact this passage is written as if by a person called Wisdom. What appears to be a very ordinary human characteristic becomes a person; and not just any person but the first creation of God, God's personal assistant.

Because it is written in the first person we cannot assign a gender to Wisdom based on this passage; but in another of the wisdom writings, the Book of Wisdom itself, Wisdom is referred to as 'she' – so I will do the same. Wisdom tells us that she was she first of God's creation, that she was with him at the creation of the world, that God delighted in her and she delighted in his creation.

In the Book of Genesis we hear that God creates by the power of his word; we hear that God breathes life into the dust to make a new human being. But there is no sense that there is another person else present.

From the Christian perspective, here in the Book of Proverbs we have the beginning of the understanding the Trinity: the idea that the Father is not alone. It is not obvious whether Wisdom might be the Spirit or the Son – but the fact that she is described as female would point in the direction of the Spirit rather than the Son.

Be that as it may, when Paul writes to the Colossians about Jesus, he uses the language of Proverbs and Wisdom. Like Wisdom, Jesus is the first born of all creation. But Paul goes further than Solomon. Solomon describes Wisdom as if she is a witness to creation, watching in admiration as the Father brings all into being; Paul writes that all things have been created through Jesus and for Jesus; Jesus is not only in the past but also in the present, holding all things together.

What Paul is saying is that nothing makes sense without Jesus. We can take that in a very practical level. We might argue that the teachings of Jesus are the foundation of how we live. The homely or comic advice of Proverbs has been superseded by the radical teaching of Jesus about forgiveness and reconciliation. But there is more than this. We believe that through baptism, through sharing in the Eucharist we become part of Jesus. We become part of God who has been present since the beginning of time. We obey the teaching of Jesus not because we are good people, not because we have amazing self-will and determination: that was the Jewish way. We obey the teachings of Jesus and become like because we become part of him – in the words of John's Gospel we become part of the vine by absorbing his teaching, receiving his love, hearing and reflecting on his word and receiving his body and his blood.

John the Evangelist knew all that. The opening of John's Gospel is the culmination of the Wisdom tradition found in Proverbs and Colossians: The Word became flesh.

This is the heart of the Christian message. The 'word' in the normal, everyday sense, is present from day one. In Genesis chapter one every act of creation begins with 'God said.' And God continues to speak through his prophets. Isaiah describes the word of God as if it were a person:

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,

so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;

it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Isaiah 55:10-11

I should stress the words, 'as if.' Isaiah is not suggesting that God's word really is a person. But John the Evangelist does – and not just hint at it – he spells it out. The word can now be touched, seen, hugged, whipped as well as heard. God has become completely personal.

There are considerable differences within the Christian tradition about how talk about God. Some traditions describe him as a friend, a buddy, a mate:

'What a friend we have in Jesus.'

Others describe him in much more distant terms

'Immortal, invisible, God only wise.'

The reality that we need to hang on to is that Jesus Christ is both. The Jesus whose spirit fill your heart and mind, the Jesus whose body and blood you share in the Eucharist the Jesus whom you meet in the homeless man or the schizophrenic woman is also the creator of the world. Jesus is the Word made flesh.

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4th February 2018