

Some thoughts on the Lectionary Readings for Year A – 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time (2nd Service) – Eric Brown

Lectionary Readings: Proverbs 4: 1-18
Psalm 142
1 John 3: 16-4: 6
Mark 10: 35-45

This week we share a third, and final, reading from the Book of Proverbs. Week one centred round the word ‘if’, and week two ‘obtaining wisdom’ (Proverbs 3):

- ¹³ Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding,
- ¹⁴ for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold.
- ¹⁵ She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her.
- ¹⁶ Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honour.
- ¹⁷ Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace.
- ¹⁸ She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her; those who hold her fast will be blessed.

In the “New International Version” the passage for this week, from Proverbs 4, is headed ‘**Get wisdom at any cost**’. It adds very little, except emphasis, to the thoughts shared last week. There are key verses of ‘instructions’ from the Lord, and the consequences if those instructions are followed:

- ¹⁰ Listen, my son, accept what I say, and the years of your life will be many.
- ¹¹ I instruct you in the way of wisdom and lead you along straight paths.
- ¹² When you walk, your steps will not be hampered; when you run, you will not stumble.
- ¹³ Hold on to instruction, do not let it go; guard it well, for it is your life.

It is the Lord who gives us ‘wisdom’ if we are in tune with Him.

The Lectionary reading concludes with the verse:

- ¹⁸ The path of the righteous is like the morning sun, shining ever brighter till the full light of day.

This concept of “the morning sun shining ever brighter till the full light of day” has been brought home to me recently – taking photographs of the wildlife on the Stour in Blandford (otters have appeared again!). If the sun is shining in the middle of the day there is plenty of light - exposure is good and some great images have been obtained. Earlier in the morning – when the otters are most often seen and the kingfishers active – the light is not so good and images tend to be rather grainy. I am still looking for that ‘perfect’ kingfisher shot and the chance to photograph an otter!

Bob Fraser, a retired minister in the Uniting Church in Australia, has written a ‘hymn’ based on the ‘Wisdom’ of Proverbs, and using the well-known form and tune of the song ‘Molly Malone’:

On the streets of each city
where the ethics aren’t pretty,
Wisdom calls out in the busiest square.
Off’ring insight in detail
(not seafood for retail),
Crying “Wisdom, knowledge, alive, alive-o”.
(Chorus: Alive, alive-o, etc.)

To the simple, she’s cryin’
“Come, drink of my wine (sung as “wy-un”)
And eat of the bread at the table I’ve set.
Leave ign’rance behind!
Come now, stretch your mind!
Tasting wisdom, knowledge, alive, alive-o”
(Chorus: Alive, alive-o, etc.)

Psalm 142 is another Psalm attributed to David. It is described as a maskil – there is uncertainty over this description. A footnote in NIV suggests it is probably a literary or musical term.

We are also told that the Psalm originated “when he was in the cave and that it was a prayer”.

We know David and his small band of followers took shelter and cover in a cave while they were being pursued by King Saul. This may or may not have been the time of composition of the Psalm.

It is clearly an appeal for help:

- ⁶ Listen to my cry, for I am in desperate need; rescue me from those who pursue me, for they are too strong for me.

An appeal for help in a time of distress, yes; but David also expresses his trust and confidence in the Lord:

- ⁵ I cry to you, LORD; I say, ‘You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living.’
- ⁷ Set me free from my prison, **that I may praise your name.**
Then the righteous will gather about me because of your goodness to me.

In times of adversity do we find the same confidence in the Lord that David found? Do we turn to Him as our first course of action?

Looking through the whole of John's first letter in the NIV we note the section headings:

'The Word of Life', 'Walking in the Light', 'Do not Love the World', 'Warning against Antichrists', 'Children of God', 'Love one Another', 'Test the Spirits', 'God's Love and Ours', 'Faith in the Son of God', 'Concluding Remarks'.

At the beginning of the 'Love one Another' section, John writes (3: 11): *"This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another"*. He goes on to contrast 'Christian Love' with worldly attitudes and actions. He then gives us a warning (3: 13-14): *Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you. We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death."*

In the Twenty-first Century, in the United Kingdom, part of the developed world, are we challenged? - by John's words in (3: 17-18):

¹⁷ If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? ¹⁸ **Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.**

Words come easily; financial contributions may be possible but are these the **actions** that John means in his letter?

If we had read further into chapter 4 we would have come across the following passage:

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. ¹⁷ This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: in this world we are like Jesus. ¹⁸ There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

¹⁹ **We love because he first loved us.** ²⁰ Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.

²¹ **And he has given us this command: anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.**

Our passage today concludes with a 'difficult' passage on "Testing the Spirits" - referring to 'false prophets'. At the time John was writing to the Christian Church, false prophets such as the 'Gnostics' were attempting to spread their message - Jesus was only 'divine' from His baptism to His death. It was a mere human who died on the cross. Matthew records the warning of false prophets given by Jesus (7: 15-16):

"They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognise them."

Paul warns Timothy (1 Tim. 4: 1): *"The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits"* Peter gives a similar warning in his second letter.

Do 'alien spirits' exist today?

Paul writing to the Ephesians (6: 10-13):

¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. ¹¹ Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. ¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, **against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.** ¹³ Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.

Have we any right to believe that the battle is over, that spiritual forces of evil no longer exist?

The Gospel reading challenges each one of us to examine motives. James and John were looking for pre-eminent positions 'when Jesus came into His glory'.

What drives us, what are our desires? Are we also looking for recognition, for responsibility, for positions of leadership?

We would do well to heed the words of Jesus to His disciples at the conclusion of our reading:

⁴² Jesus called them together and said, 'You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.

⁴³ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.

⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'

From heaven you came, helpless babe,
Entered our world, Your glory veiled,
Not to be served but to serve,
And give your life that we might live.
*This is our God, the Servant King,
He calls us now to follow Him,
To bring our lives as a daily offering
Of worship to the Servant King.*

There in the garden of tears
My heavy load He chose to bear;
His heart with sorrow was torn,
'Yet not My will but Yours,' He said.

Come see His hands and His feet,
The scars that speak of sacrifice,
Hands that flung stars into space
To cruel nails surrendered.

**So let us learn how to serve
And in our lives enthrone Him,
Each other's needs to prefer,
For it is Christ we're serving.**