

Worship and Wisdom 20.3.11 RBC morning service

Read *Psalms 111* and *Proverbs 2: 1-11*

Our service this morning is entitled ‘worship and wisdom’ – we’ve come to the part of the E100 series that focuses on the Psalms and Proverbs – and it’s time for a change of pace, a change of style, and brings the chance to engage a different side of who we are.

The readings we’ve covered so far have all given a historical background to the people of Israel. We’ve seen the creation of the world, and the creation of a specific people group. We’ve witnessed the Lord God engaging with his people individually and collectively over hundreds of years, and have learnt much about the detail of events, but also about the nature of God – His faithfulness and steadfastness, His sovereignty and purity, His power and His majesty.

Whilst finding the *time* to read may not have been easy, the chapters and books themselves have been quite easy to read when you get down to it. There is a flow, a narrative, and if you’re anything like me the readings were sometimes a little frustrating as we dipped in and out of a bigger story. I found myself skipping back and forth in my bible to put a passage in context, and find out what had happened before it.

Now we come to two books of the bible that are very different in nature to those we’ve read so far, and need to be read in a different way. The readings from Psalms and Proverbs introduce us to both poetry and wisdom literature. Not that there is no poetry or wisdom elsewhere in the bible – that’s obviously not the case – but rather that in these books certain types of writing have been collected, and need to be understood as such.

King David, of whom we’ve read so much recently, is acknowledged to be the author of most – but not all - of the Psalms. Whilst Solomon, his son, whose continuing reign God had spoken to David about, is the author of most – but not all - of the book of Proverbs. The history we have been reading about comes alive in another way as we experience how these two men express themselves.

The Psalms are a record of prayer and praise to the Lord God. They are both personal and corporate. They give voice to emotions that a British stiff upper lip might quite prefer were hidden away. They are *honest* responses to God in the varying situations of life.

So how do we read the Psalms? For some, who love poetry and poetical writing, that’s rather a non-question. You’ll be the type of person who can just dive into the eloquence and form of the language, for whom verbal illustrations inspire mental pictures which lead to a deeper ability to respond to God and who he is. Others will read ‘just words’, and it won’t be until some aspect of a Psalm resonates with an emotional experience that suddenly meaning becomes deeper, understanding is given and a meeting point with God is reached.

Perhaps a modern analogy will help. We come to church, week after week, and we sing songs to our Lord. Songs with different words, different emphases, different focus. But they are all to the same God, and are all about who He is and our response to him.

Sometimes when you sing the songs your focus will be on the words – mentally acknowledging the truths they hold, statements of faith in a God who creates, a God who loves, a God who saves. Other times when we come to worship our emotions are more engaged – whether because of our personality, situations we are facing at the time or even because of God choosing that moment to speak directly to us. The same songs, the same words draw out a very different response from us on the those occasions.

Neither is right or wrong. Neither is good or bad. And so it is with the Psalms. Whether you read them with your intellect or your emotions, or indeed a mixture of the two, the important thing is to read them! Just knowing about God – about his history with the people of Israel – isn't enough. We need to *respond* to him, and the Psalms help us to do just that.

The readings for this week – whether you've started them already, or will be coming up to them in the next few days, can only give a brief glimpse into the variety of Psalms that there are, and the themes that are contained within them.

The song we sang just now takes it's lyrics almost directly from one of them - Psalm 23, The Lord is my Shepherd.

It's a song that speaks of comfort and trust, peace and protection. It also uses an analogy that would have been very personal to David, who started life, if you remember, as a shepherd boy. It was a context that was very meaningful to him, and often appeared in his words of praise.

I read of an international gathering of Christians who were looking at this Psalm and were invited to re-write it in terms that were relevant to them. They came up with many suggestions, including:

“The Lord is my taxi driver; he will take me where He wants me to go”

and

“The Lord is my friend, I shall not be alone ...”

If you find that the imagery and language of a Psalm isn't connecting with you, you could try a similar exercise. Try and draw out the themes and ideas that are being conveyed, and then put them in terms that do mean something. A more time consuming exercise to be sure, but one that gives a much more personal experience of God.

The Psalms aren't all about trusting and praising God, though. There are those that speak volumes into lives that are full of pain and hurt. Don't put your hands up, but think back. How many of you can remember a time when life was really hard, and you found yourself amazed to find that your exact emotions – maybe fear, devastation, bitterness, loss - were expressed in one of the Psalms? I know I have.

The songs of David, and others, are honest responses to life – the good *and* the bad. There's no hiding, no covering up, just an openness with God that can help us in our troubles; and a hope that looks to the future, trusting in him.

The E100 book puts it like this:

“Have you ever experienced a time of overwhelming disaster? How do you react when your world falls apart?

Sometimes the only way forward is to look back to what God has done in the past: ‘Lord, I’m miserable, I can’t take it any more and I see no way out. But you’ve been good to me in the past so I’m trusting that you won’t abandon me now.’”

The book goes on to highlight psalms, written during Israel’s lowest point in biblical history when they had been taken into exile, that do just that. Psalms that remember God’s mercy and love in the past and hold on to him for the future – even though the present is as rubbish as it can possibly be.

That can be the reality of life for us sometimes as well – and in that reality the psalms can help us to find a way through.

And then there’s confession. Ah, but we don’t need that, do we ...?! Well, maybe we do. Sometimes when we know we’ve wandered from God’s way it’s hard to express that – to be able to put into words what we feel, what we want to say. At other times, like David, we don’t even realise how far we’ve gone astray, until someone else points it out to us. Psalm 51 was David’s response when brought face to face with his sin over Bathsheba, and the death he caused not only of her husband but also others in his army.

In it he realises the depths of his mistakes, and the pain he has caused not only on a human level, but to God as well, and he pours out his heart and soul in repentance.

None of us are perfect – even David who was described as a man after God’s own heart, who was the one God used to establish the kingdom of Israel, and who was the forerunner of an ancestry that led directly to Jesus, even David messed up, and he messed up big time.

When we find it hard to confess to God the depth of our errors, the Psalms can help us find words to express, but they also give us confidence of God’s forgiveness.

Verse 17 of Psalm 51 says this:

“The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

We can have the same, if not deeper, assurance that David felt, that if we confess our sins God is faithful and just and will forgive us - because of the forgiveness Jesus bought for us on the cross.

I’m aware that I’ve dived about the place somewhat, giving an overview of the book of Psalms, and the readings covered this week, but I really wanted to give you a

flavour of the variety of the material that is there, to encourage you to persevere in your readings, both with the E100 series, but also around them, to find other Psalms that express what you want to say to God at this present time, with what is happening in your life right now.

And so we move on to the book of Proverbs. If the Psalms give us support and guidance in how we might respond emotionally to God in our lives, Proverbs gives us both wise instruction for day-to-day living, and an overview that gives us *God's* perspective on life, rather than our own.

We move from a response to God that focuses on our emotions to one that looks at our behaviours.

I've already mentioned that the majority of the book is attributed to Solomon as being the author. Solomon who, if you remember from the last couple of weeks readings, was born to David and Bathsheba after their first child, conceived in such terrible circumstances, died. Solomon who was loved by God and who, when given the opportunity to ask for whatever he wanted from the Lord, was wise enough to ask for yet more wisdom – to ask for a discerning heart to be able to fulfil the role of leadership that was to be his.

It is fitting then that he should be the one to have recorded a whole series of guidance notes on the living of life.

We need to pause here for a moment to clarify the type of writing that this is. The book of proverbs contains statements about human nature and the consequences of actions, they are not prophecies or promises. To put it another way, proverbs is full of guidance from an older to a younger generation, designed to illuminate life and life decisions. They are generalisations, stating what is generally but not invariably, true.

I emphasise this point because if we read proverbs as cast-iron promises from God, we get into trouble, and can easily become disappointed that the Lord hasn't or doesn't provide things he never actually said he would in the first place.

So, as good advice and a basis for living, what does this book have to say to us?

Again and again the author comes back to the same theme: practical wisdom for life based on the foundation of fearing the Lord.

Chapter 3 verses 5 to 7 says this:

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and shun evil.”

There is much advice in Proverbs that would be accepted by people generally, in and out of the church – don't get in with a bad crowd, treat people fairly, hard work brings prosperity, a wild tongue brings ruin ... But these statements weren't intended to be understood in a vacuum. They were and are to be received by those who honour and fear the Lord, who choose to put his values and priorities at the forefront of their lives.

Quite some time ago now, when I first went off to university, I had a little yellow car who, because of an unfortunate resemblance to the much-maligned Lada of the time, I didn't love perhaps quite as much as I ought! To give my little car more character and identity I became a fan of those stickers you can put on cars, with messages or pictures. The Girls' Brigade badge was there, of course, but also this, from Proverbs 9 verse 10:

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”

(Those who are feeling very alert this morning will also remember the exact same phrase from the end of Psalm 111 that I read earlier.)

As I was off to university where we all thought ourselves so clever, and were going to be taught by people who thought themselves even more clever, this amused me no end. Wisdom is not to be found in books, or these days by trawling through the internet. It is to be found by putting the God who made us at the centre of our lives.

As we saw earlier with the children's illustration, knowledge in itself is not enough. Knowing that a tomato is actually a fruit is an interesting bit of trivia, but it doesn't help in the slightest when it comes to food preparation, when it comes to using the thing for what it was actually designed for.

For us in the church it's easy to know *about* God, *about* Jesus. We come each week, we hear the stories, we gain knowledge. But the wisdom proverbs speaks of, teaches what to do with that knowledge. Wisdom is understanding that just knowing *about* Jesus isn't enough. The book of James, in the New Testament, reminds us that even the demons believe in God – and shudder by the way – but that sense of believing, in *knowing* something to be true, isn't enough. **Knowing** the facts isn't faith.

Wisdom is allowing those facts to make a difference; allowing Jesus to take his rightful place as Lord of your life. Allowing the facts to **become** faith.

I searched high and low for a story to end this part of the service with. I wanted something that would stick in everyone's minds so that, even if you forgot everything I had to say, you would remember the story, and have a chance to reflect on the wisdom of God as the week goes on.

My ancient collection of books failed me on this occasion, nor could I find just the right story on the internet. Then, like a practical illustration of using God's resources rather than the world's, I was led back to Jesus' own words in the New Testament.

Initially, this simply pleased me – I now had my story – and entertained me, as I saw God's sense of humour: *practise what you preach Deborah, practise what you preach!*

But then came last Sunday morning's service, and I found Iain had chosen the same story to finish his service with.

Let me read it to you, from Matthew chapter 7, starting at verse 24:
Matt 7:24-27

When God emphasises a point like that, it's usually for a reason.
What is he wanting to say to us through that story?
Is it for us as a church, or for one or more individuals?

Maybe it's time to stop and ask ourselves:

Am I wise or am I foolish?

Whose values am I basing my life upon?

As we prepare ourselves for communion, spend a few moments now quietly before God. Allow him to show you, not only himself, but yourself as well. Who is in charge of your life?

For those who've already committed ourselves to God, that's a question we need to ask day-by-day. Are we still allowing God to be in charge? Are we making decisions and living a life based on his values, his wisdom?

And for those who haven't made that decision, or aren't sure, perhaps this is your day to think, to decide, to be wise enough to know that just knowing about God is not enough.