

God's Wisdom

Proverbs 1:20-33, Wisdom 7:26-8:1, Mark 8:27-38

Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice. At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gate she speaks: "How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?" (Proverbs 1:20-22)

Wisdom is personified as a woman in Proverbs. She speaks on the street, at the public square and the gate, but despite speaking the truth everywhere she can her biggest challenge is getting anyone to listen.

Things don't look much different today from the time of Solomon. I thought that last Sunday's Doonesbury comic strip was right on target. Mark, a character in the strip who heads a PBS radio talk show, is interviewing conspiratologist Page Griffin about American gullibility. "*It's quite remarkable Mark,*" Page says, "*Americans believe in many things that can't be verified. For instance almost half of us believe in ghosts and 40% in alien abductions. And that availability to alternative reality is reflected in conspiracy theory from truthism which holds that Bush was behind 9/11 to birthism (which holds that Obama was born in Keyna). And of course we still have many legacy fringe groups like the JFK grassy knollers, the staged moon landingists, etc.*" The interviewer Mark breaks in, "*Professor, is there any counter to these powerful theorists?*" "*Not really Mark,*" Professor Griffin replies, "*only the reasonists.*" "*Reasonists,*" Mark asks. "*They believe in an evidence based world, something called rationalism. But it's a tiny group, not so influential.*"

These days Wisdom is not only ignored but shouted down in public debate. The debate on health care often seems to be based on who can shout the loudest and garner the most media attention. The lies and crazy accusations given credence are further proof of American gullibility. TV media focuses on the shouting at public forums, interviewing the shouters and shoutees, while ignoring the critical issues. Wisdom may be speaking herself horse with no one listening if this debate is all about partisanship and not about the public good. Does anyone other than *reasonists* care about the public good anymore?

Lady Wisdom is prophetic in Proverbs. The fools who hate knowledge and scoffers will get there comeuppance in the end. Then they will wish they had listened to Wisdom but it will be too late.

Wisdom – Sophia – is personified as a woman in Proverbs and also in the Wisdom of Solomon from the Apocrypha. Lady Wisdom is so highly regarded in the first 9 chapters of Proverbs that she is identified as an attribute or characteristic of the Lord, as well as one who gives voice to what the Lord says. Proverbs 8:22ff pictures Wisdom as the first of God's works, as present with God at the creation. The Canticle in praise of wisdom calls her "*a reflection of eternal light, a flawless mirror of God's activity, an image of divine goodness.*" High praise indeed! In recent times there has been great theological interest in lady Wisdom as representing the feminine side of God.

The idea of wisdom as pre-existent and sharing in the very act of creation led the Gospel writer John to connect Wisdom with the pre-existent *Word* or *Logos* of God. *In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. And this pre-existent Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us. Jesus is God's Wisdom incarnate.*

The Apostle Paul also identifies Jesus with God's Wisdom. In 1 Corinthians 1:30 Paul wrote, "*He (God) is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption.*" But God's wisdom expressed in Christ is paradoxical; it is unexpected; it is contrary to everything one might expect. In 1 Cor. 1:18-25 Paul wrote:

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of the age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

Jesus himself takes up the theme of paradoxical wisdom in today's Gospel lesson from the pivotal 8th Chapter of the Gospel of Mark. Jesus brought his disciples to the outskirts of the Roman fortress town of Caesarea Philippi where he asked them what people were saying about him. When he asked his disciples what they said about him Peter finally got it and in that Roman territory blurted out the subversive words that *you are the Messiah*, the coming King. Peter understood this from the conventional wisdom of power. Jesus was going to take charge and reign. But Jesus then taught his disciples that he would undergo great suffering, be rejected by the elders and be killed, and then in three days rise again. That was the last thing Peter wanted and he rebuked Jesus for even thinking such a thing. "*Get behind me, Satan,*" Jesus told Peter, "*for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.*" (Mark 8:33b) Then Jesus showed where his wisdom led. Speaking to the crowds he said, "*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.*" (Mark 8:34-36)

Jesus turns conventional wisdom on its head. Power is not to be had through human kingdoms but through dying on a cross. Life is not to be found in claiming it or winning it, but by losing it. Jesus' coming kingdom is claimed through his self-offering. Our claim to follow Jesus must come the same way, through self-denial and a willingness to let go of ourselves. Jesus is calling us to a life that challenges and clashes with much that we take for granted with the unthinking and selfish choices we make every day.

Conspiracy theories, partisan and mean-spirited politics are but one form of foolishness. What are some of the foolish choices that you and I make? How might Lady Wisdom be calling out to us that we choose to ignore? How does her voice get drowned out by the competing voices of self-interest, of politics, of pride, of temptation and the like? How might we be so sure of ourselves that we risk losing what's really important? Have our politics become so partisan that we demonize our opponents? Are we ever so sure we're right that we act without thinking?

How can we enact our Lord's paradoxical wisdom in our lives and in the way we practice our faith? How might we try and enact our Lord's paradoxical wisdom in the marketplace? At work? In the public square? In debate? In the way we treat others?

The wisdom of Christ may look like folly to the world but as Paul says, to those who are being saved it is *the power of God and the wisdom of God*. (1 Corinthians 1:24b)