

## Saint Columba, Ordinary Sunday 15: 6<sup>th</sup> July 2008

### Theme: “Wisdom in Action”

Romans 7: 15-25a

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Sometime I am so frustrated when I consult the resources books as I begin to think about the lectionary readings set for the coming Sunday and the sermon I am going to prepare, because they seem to miss the point for me!

We have to remember that the original Hebrew and Greek had no punctuation: no full stops or capital letters, no quotation marks and certainly no chapters and verses. So already in marking these there has been some interpreting going on.

Usually the selected texts are very familiar and we have been hearing them forever, and we simply roll on with the usual cluster of texts and the themes that the Prayer Book and other resource providers set out. For example, this week we are invited to focus on the text from Matthew: “come to me all who are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest... take my yoke, because ... it is easy and my burden light.” And we focus on the ‘easy yoke’, remembering that a yoke is what animals wear when they are used by farmers for ploughing, or what people who carry heavy loads wear to spread the weight of the load. *The stole worn by priests is said to symbolise this yoke!*

Sometimes, like this week, that does not seem adequate in order to do justice to the underlying message contained in the reading. If we take the whole set of lectionary texts for this morning, the main theme of the passage is about ‘wisdom’. And it is the last part of verse 19 that carries the key: ‘...*Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds*’ (or as many translators write ‘*by her children*’).

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Wisdom is often personified in female form. In the First Testament there is a close association between Wisdom and creation. In Proverbs, Wisdom is the female figure working with God in the process of creation itself. With such a focus on creation we can see that wisdom is about having a ‘big picture’ view and raising our focus from the ‘bits and pieces’ of everyday life to consider a wider view, a different perspective.

In our Matthew reading, Jesus is telling off not only the powerful people who have attacked John and opposed him but also the ‘little people’, the ordinary people we heard about last week. He compares his entire generation as stubborn and obstinate ‘children’. They will not listen to John, nor will they listen to him when he points toward the inevitable outcomes of continuing ‘as things are’! They refuse to play one game and then another...John is too strange and Jesus is too ‘normal’. By using the familiar image of ‘Wisdom’ – the one who will be vindicated by her deeds – Jesus draws attention to the way outcomes will eventually reveal who has made ‘wise’ decisions. Creation-linked wisdom looks beyond the present: we do have to live in the *now*, but First Testament approaches see wisdom as drawing together past, present, and future. It is about learning from the past, and about recognising the consequences of what we do now.

It is this kind of wisdom, I suggest, that is shown when we face seriously the questions of global climate change: a big picture issue with future consequences and implications for the whole planet that we can take action on in the present.

Wisdom breaks open tradition-based thinking that repeats the ‘same old’ – no matter how wise that might have been in a previous generation. Wisdom opens up new possibilities, explores new ideas, dares to move beyond the square. Wisdom is about imagination.

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Later in the Matthew passage Jesus is depicted as praying aloud in public – undoubtedly so the gathered people can hear! He is being ‘sarcastic’ – I think – when he says God hides this important stuff from the “wise and intelligent” and reveals it instead to infants.

It seems to me that this is linking ‘true wisdom’, the wisdom that works as co-creator with God, with an attitude of humility. We’ll really only get the point of important things, we’ll really only appreciate the meaning of God’s activity, we’ll really only get close to what Jesus was on about if we recognise we can’t be certain about much of what we know.

Here wisdom is linked with faith. Faith – that attitude of exploring our world with a sense of commitment and trust – like a child exploring the world with trust and inquisitiveness rather than certain knowledge. Jesus is adding to the familiar First Testament understanding of wisdom as linked with creation – he is linking wisdom with humility and faith. It is not wise, in this sense, to be so sure of ourselves and our beliefs or ideas. That goes against all the so-called ‘Wisdom Literature’ of the Bible. Wisdom calls for humility.

It seems to me that the current controversy in the world wide Anglican Communion could note this! Being so certain that you are right and everyone else is wrong and taking actions that will destroy the fragile historical links that have held this world communion together could do with a little humility. While the controversy might on the surface appear to be about hospitality to gay and lesbians and their right to live loving Christian lives, beneath it is a power struggle about who has the authority to interpret Scriptures. Power is at the heart of the issue: who has the right, the correct answers!

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We often think about wisdom as having to do with the answers a person can give, or the ideas they produce. But that is not what the Bible says.

In the Romans reading, we have the convoluted passage where Paul struggles with his experience that ‘knowing what is right to do’ doesn’t necessarily mean you do it! He is very self-revealing when he lets us know that “I do not do what I want, but the very thing I hate”. For Paul, in many ways, sin is the opposite of wisdom. ‘Knowing what is right’ is not wise in itself. It is easy to know what is right, he suggests, but it is not so easy to do it. Just knowing it is not an expression of wisdom in any of the ways we have been thinking of wisdom.

For Paul, the key is in *doing* it.

Paul is talking about what we probably call ‘morality’ or ‘ethical behaviour’. I think this actually applies to all our ideas about life and the world. Ideas, clever insights, positive ideas about behaviour or the way the world might be, understanding of God’s loving way – none of them are wise without doing something about it, without action.

For us, love pushes us toward acting in ways that show concern, compassion, care – for others and for our world. Love is meaningless unless it does something that makes the feelings or attitudes concrete.

Today we have the practical opportunity to put love into action in the way we have responded to the invitation from the City Mission to bring something orange, or a something, a blanket to keep someone in our city warm.

Christian love makes sure that wisdom shows itself in action. We are wise persons when we are also loving persons, when our actions end up reflecting what we know to be right.

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Throughout the Bible, as I read it, God’s wisdom and God’s love are presented as partners. You do not get wisdom without love so far as God is concerned. Wisdom weaves her way through the pages of the Bible and Jesus associates himself with it frequently. I think wisdom has often been overlooked because of other teaching we have had, but now is the time when we need wisdom in our world and church. We need wise action that will be vindicated by outcomes that demonstrate love for all people.

As disciples we are called to wise action:

action that positively and imaginatively responds to the whole of creation and works with God’s ongoing creative love to heal and sustain life.

Amen