

The Well-Spring of Wisdom and Strangeness and Order of God

Proverbs 4:10-27 and John 3:1-18

Good morning!

I am glad to be with you this morning. I am grateful for the opportunity to be in worship along-side you. If you have not been with us since last week, Stephen Hooper did start us on our Lenten study. And our Lenten study is through the rubric of the book of Proverbs. The title of our Lenten study is “True Wisdom for Living” and for the course of these six weeks leading to Holy week we will be unpacking what it means to walk the Way/Path to Wisdom. And so, the first week was “Training in Wisdom” and, we looked at Wisdom as a pathway and not a door. In that, to walk the path of wisdom we are called to submit ourselves to some mundane repetitive habits that then will determines the people we become. We also realized last week that repetition is not redundancy. Because the fact is, we are always disciplined through repetition.

And so, today I am going to be talking about Wisdom as it relates to character formation – and the disposition that our hearts should take so that we can learn how to make the right choices in places where moral rules don’t apply. I believe that the Lenten study so far has been good, and to some extent very challenging. And I foresee that this Lenten study is going to be a challenging study for many of us because of many reasons and I think I want to talk about those reasons because I think they are important, because it may help us understand and work through some of the challenges we might encounter.

The first reason I think the study about Wisdom will be challenging is because we are living at a moment in time when life as it is, is forcing us to sift through a lot of complex issues. For instance, questions of gender identity. I.e., what it means to be male and what it means to be female; and what it means to not identify in either of those definitions. Questions around transgender identity. And this is not just for adults; but also, for a number of children I know at my kids’ school and in around our community. You see these are a just some of the many complex set of questions and issues that are being asked. And so, trying to keep up, trying to process with integrity. Trying to understand what is, that is at stake and trying to reflect thoughtfully about all that. And then to trying to interact with others with wisdom

almost seems impossible given the pace and circumstances. And the way it is affecting people, families, churches, denominations, all are struggling across a wide range of topics, because everything is so charged, and the stakes seems so high.

Additionally, to that. we are mostly trained to what to know what the right thing is to do. And so, we are rarely habituated to know how to behaviour/or respond well in places where moral rules don't apply. But not only that. We are connected to our cultural context and that has a way of thinking and talking about character formation. So, any time a person gets the opportunity to talk about Wisdom as it relates to character formation is going to be a mine field. Especially if one is hoping to say something creative, and with the hope of not to just re-cycling the problems that are often associated with character formation. And so, I am feeling a bit of that challenge this morning. In fact, I have been wrestling with this talk the whole week.

Anyway, it is correct for me to say that culturally we are constantly being shaped. We are often swimming unthinkingly in the tide of prevailing cultural obsession and addictions. And by that token it is difficult for us to identify the hidden currents which do pull us in the opposing directions. Do you hear what I am saying? There so many forces in play in the water that we are swimming in that we are being pulled by things which are often so complex, and we don't even know what they are much less how they are forming us.

And then connected to that. We should add politics. In particular, sexual politics. And so, we often come to most conversations as either Conservative or Progressive. We come in either as Labour or National. We come in either as New Zealand First or Greens. And for the most part churches have often only been too happy to accommodate these binaries. Choosing and stoking to divide. Extending the dualism. Reinforcing the characterization in the attempt to win a supposed cultural war. And so, layer upon layer upon layer of identities that are constantly being developed in us slowly over time, held unconsciously, sub-consciously and all of that, before we ever even get to the gospel.

And we then come into church shaped with those layers of identities and then we ask where do you stand on such, and such an issue. We hope to make a declaration, or a decision and we then go look for places that are congruent with or

reinforce our predetermined values. Those are the reasons that make the topic of today. Character formation, profoundly difficult.

You see on one hand we have this holy longing to want to know what is the right thing to do. In fact, I think this is the reason the writer of Proverbs says:

**“My son, pay attention to what I say;
turn your ear to my words.
Do not let them out of your sight,
keep them within your heart.
Why? Because they are life to those who find them
and health to one’s whole body”.**

But yet the complexities I have mentioned in our culture makes that longing hard to realised. And so, it raises the question is there a centre? And can the centre hold? I believe there is a centre, but it takes work to find it and to hold it and to live from it. And that is illustrated by the fact that in this study of Proverbs as it relates to character formation, I have been talking for 10 mins and I haven’t really said anything yet. And that is intentional. Because part of the work is understanding the nature of the challenges before us.

I was thinking this week about how often Jesus was approached and confronted by a binary, this or that but he refused to answer the question on the terms that it was often asked. Because if he had answered the questions on those terms, he would only respond in only one or two ways. Instead Jesus choose to elevate the conversation to the heart. He would choose a third space. You see I am not solving anything by the way today. But I think it was important for us to talk about identity, and also pill back the layers that I have been talking about so that we can get to the heart. This is why the writer of Proverbs say.

**“Above all else, guard your heart,
for everything you do flows from it.”**

Again, Jesus in John. John writes.

“Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by Night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God”. Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above.”

Did you notice that Jesus did not even respond to Nicodemus' reference to the sign, instead Jesus choose to go after the matters on Nicodemus heart, even though Nicodemus seemed to struggle to get what Jesus was all about. Jesus did not get Nicodemus off the hook. He continued to plough Nicodemus' heart again and again. Why? Because Jesus was not just after forming ethical people, but he was after inviting people to learn to walk in wisdom. Which is to say people filled with the Spirit of God.

Then Jesus answered Nicodemus.

“Very truly I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born form above.”

Again, Jesus said, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of the water and spirit”

What Jesus is saying to Nicodemus is *metanoia*. *Metanoia* is f course a Greek word, a compound word. Which brings together a preposition and a noun. *Meta-* come out of or be over or above. And *nous* – mind. Come out of your mind. What Jesus is saying to Nicodemus is you need to wake up. You need to come out of the stories that have been animating your life thus far. Why is that important for Nicodemus? Because as a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews he had a lot narratives about what it was going to look like when God was to show up in the messiah when he finally arrives and his stories were all wrong. Because he had imaginations that had been co-opted into a certain kind of story of what God looked like.

And so, in order for him to see God, which is by the way His Kingdom. Nicodemus had to wake up. He had to come into reality. He had to come out the stories that were competing with reality. In other words, Nicodemus for him to see the Kingdom of God he could not afford to be paranoid. He had to be Metanoid. He had to come

out off and not collapse away from reality. But he had to open himself to reality. He needed to begin to live accordingly. i.e., Nicodemus needed to be reborn and have his imagination baptised by water and Spirit.

You see I believe John's gospel confront us as Kiwi consumers who live out our lives claiming rights to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness. I think if the early church was to be plot down with us, they will be very confused by the way we live our lives in this way. And if you have spent any time with brothers and sisters from the developing world countries, they are confused by our Christian identity in the West and the way it has been co-opted with the larger cultural narrative. It would be one thing if perhaps the fruit of our Western identity was healthy and strong, but it is not. We are in all kind of addictions, emotional addictions, physical addiction, consumer addiction. What is Jesus' alternative? Baptism. We have been buried with Jesus in death, and when we come out of the water our identity gets remade in Christ. We become a new creation.

You see our imagination for the most part has been domesticated and that is the reason why Jesus say Wake up. We can't imagine another reality that is why we have to see it and begin to experience it. You guys the early church struggled with this too. And the reason they struggled with it is because they were also confused. And in pain around challenging things in their lives together as a community. And struggle and suffering have a way of limiting our horizons. Because as we begin to become fearful, we very predictably reduce our vulnerability. We become necessarily protective. And so today the passage I want to finish with is a passage out of the book of Hebrews. I don't know if you guys know the context of the book of Hebrews. The book of Hebrews is written to a group of people who have been Christians for a while but are now beginning to suffer for their faith. They are being persecuted. Because initially they were low on the radar screen of Rome but now time has passed, and they are beginning to pay a very severe price for their faith, and they are tempted to walk away from it. And so, the whole letter is written on the theme of why they shouldn't walk away from Jesus, walk away from their faith, walk away from each other. And so, for example in chapter 10 the author of Hebrews would say,

“25 And let us not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Why should we stop meeting together? Because when we are together then people can see us and when they can see us it makes it easy for them to find us and persecute. And so, the writer of Hebrews is saying even though you are at risk, keep meeting together – and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Don't give in to fear. Because we are allied to a deeper reality that overcomes fear with faith.

Then in chapter 13. My Final parting words. I love this so much. Hebrews chapter 13 verses 1 and 2

“Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. **2 Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.**

Why do I choose to end with this passage? One of the things that was ment to characterise the early church forming around the person of Jesus Christ was that they practiced hospitality. The word their hospitality is *Filoxenia*. You know the word *Xenia* from Xeno is more often used as Xenophobia which means what? Fear of strangers. Fear of people who are others. So, the writer of Hebrews is saying not only should you not be Xenophobic, you should be Filoxenia. You should open yourself to strangers. So, people being persecuted not only do you keep meeting together, you keep opening the door to people who scare the crap out of you, and who might endanger your life. You are constantly are to make yourself vulnerable to others and to people who have been *otherised*. Why? because when you do this. Some people have actually hosted angels without knowing it. And don't think of an angel as cherubim or a morally pure creature. If you know Greek. *Angelos* means messenger. So, when we stop opening ourselves up in vulnerability to people who may be dangerous to us, we also will stop hearing from God. Or said positively if we want to hear from God (and thus walk in wisdom) then we need to choose to make ourselves vulnerable to people who scare us. And that is how we will get to guard our hearts, so that our hearts won't get to calcify as the Pharisees hearts were. Amen!

