

Trinity 20 (Last)

Ecclesiastes 11,12 2 Timothy 2:1-7

I am put in mind this week and this evening of texts from anthems that I sung or played when I was a musician at Carlisle Cathedral and chapels and churches in Cambridge and London.

First, some words from the prophet Habakkuk, set to music by Charles Villiers Stanford.

For lo, I raise up that bitter and **hasty nation**, which **march thro' the breadth of the earth, to possess the dwelling places that are not theirs**. They are terrible and dreadful, **their judgment and dignity proceed from themselves**. Their horses also are swifter than leopards, and are more fierce than the evening wolves, and their horsemen spread themselves, yea, their horsemen come from far. **They fly as an eagle that hasteth to devour, they come all of them for violence**; their faces are set as the east wind, and they gather captives as the sand. Yea, he scoffeth at kings, and princes are a derision unto him. For he heapeth up dust and taketh it. Then shall he sweep by as a wind that shall pass over and be guilty, even he whose might is his God.

Does that put you in mind of any particular happenings on the world stage at the moment? Or nationally? Repeat words in bold

That passage speaks to me of international politics, of national politics, and even of institutional politics – certainly of the institution for which I no longer work.

It speaks to me of cancellation of debt agreements that are, in fact, agreements opening the so-called beneficiaries to US trade.

I could go on, but I'll be chastised for talking politics.

And it speaks to me of pride and arrogance of those who think they know best, of those who ignore and trample on the feelings of others. I am certainly not one of those who think that Holy Scripture contains magical coded references to future events: I do not go in for hidden messages. There is no need. Human nature it seems has not changed at all in 2600 years since that passage was written. When pride and hubris and arrogance possess the human soul, we see the same effects now as then. And perhaps the saddest thing is that on the contemporary international stage, those who **march thro' the breadth of the earth, to possess the dwelling places that are not theirs**, are those that call themselves Christians.

But it need not be so. For individuals like you and me there are self-help books abounding in the shops: and people buy these and are amazed at the wisdom contained in them. And if they cared to look in Holy Scripture they could find, if they were so minded, the Wisdom literature in what we call both the OT and the Apocrypha. And they would have no need of self help books by the latest fashionable guru, whoever it may be, for it is all there in Proverbs, in Ecclesiastes, in Wisdom and so on.

We heard in the first lesson instructions to give alms, to do our best with the resources we have, to enjoy life while we can. Follow the inclination of your heart and the desire of your eyes – but be prepared to be joyful.

make most of what you have. Talents

don't be limited

tie in with riches, family etc

be open to god

But – and this is what those who **march thro' the breadth of the earth, to possess the dwelling places that are not theirs**, and all their misguided associates might remember, is that while we are doing whatever it is we are doing, we might do well to remember what will surely happen to us some day. Inexorably for some, suddenly for others, but happen it will. Vanity of vanities saith the preacher, all is vanity, emptiness. Earth to earth, dust to dust and ashes to ashes. In the words of an Ilkley moor bar tat, the worms will come and eat thee up.

What did this writer Qoholeth mean by vanity.

Hebrew hebel means vapour, thin air, pointlessness, futility,

In this case, this is a prosperous man writing – and yet even his prosperity brings no guarantee of fulfilment.

Look at today. People pursue

- Money, but feel unfulfilled.
- Possessions, but feel unfulfilled.
- Good looks, but feel unfulfilled.

- Even pain relief in illness, but feel unfulfilled. What is the point of pain relief from one condition to die a few weeks or months later of something else?

Oh that people would read learn and inwardly digest the wisdom literature.

So you might ask, what exactly is wisdom?

The Greek word for wisdom is Sophia, and that's the one I'm using. In Scripture it's not just a set of instructions, but almost a substance. In Proverbs 8 it's like a gas existing before creation, or stardust of which the universe is made, existing outside time.

- We read of the spirit of wisdom being with God at creation, the mediator between Yahweh and cosmos linking the Godhead with the tangible world we live in.
- We read of sophia being intermediate between God and creation.
- We read of radiant wisdom striding through creation, born of God and rejoicing in the created world. Rejoicing in the created world.
- We read of sophia described as Olive tree, rosebud, cinnamon, fragrant balm, incense, sweet spices, sparkling rivulet. Beautiful imagery.

We read of sophia as part of divine revelation.

- In Job 28, wisdom is hidden. Mortals do not know the way to wisdom: only God understands it.
- In Proverbs, Yahweh makes it accessible to mortals: in fact, the love that God bears for creation makes God want the best for us, so Wisdom is available to all who will heed it.
- Then the Song of Songs is the final step with (apparently) no mention of Yahweh, though many commentators have assumed that Yahweh is one of the participants in the erotic action.

Sophia is the 'the principle which orders and determines the world for the divine self-imparting which is evinced in redemption.' Schleiermacher

That sentence includes **order** (logos) and **God's agent of redemption** (Jesus).

Sophia on a par with logos (John 1) and Jesus.

So here we have the sophia concept as a link to the Incarnation. The prologue of John must be a derivation of Proverbs 8. It presents a pre-existent *something* that is the agent of creation, to which we testify in Jesus the Christ. It resonates with Hebrews and Colossians where Christ is both creator and first-born.

- **So, Sophia is personified as the ideal specimen of humanity, the divine specimen of humanity, Jesus Christ, the example by which we aim to live our lives.**
- **Sophia soaking the cosmos like a gas that we can breathe in if we are prepared to receive it.**

Perhaps this link with the Incarnation is why this passage from Ecclesiastes is set for this day which in the new lectionary is regarded by some as the last Sunday of Trinity, before the Sundays before Christmas. And in the BCP it is set for stir-up Sunday, five Sundays before Christmas.

This wisdom is very practical advice. It is **right reason**.

We need **right reason** to discern the right thing to do. The correct use of our rational processes is exactly what the wisdom literature is telling us to do.

Sophia, right reason, spirit, logos, Son of God, Jesus, love.

Sophia is God in action. But God is love, so God is wisdom.

Sophia, you might say, is love of love.

Oh how I fail. How I fail, how we fail, to heed words of wisdom. Only the discerning see all. And, speaking personally, this discernment is not always easy to come by. 'Our reason is overwhelmed by so many forms of deceptions ... that it is far from directing us aright.' (Calvin). Those unwilling to make a spiritual commitment to Wisdom will distort her truthful speech, but to those that are, Wisdom brings all her benefits. Love of love.

That's why the lesson of Timothy is so important

Endure hardship

Discipline, single-mindedness

Obedience self denial struggle

V 2 – this is for all – there is no partiality

Let me take time to meditate and tune into wisdom, cosmic rays soaking the universe. Cosmic rays soaking my body. Claud Bernard a 19th century physiology talked of the le milieu intérieur. Sophia is le milieu divin that can rehydrate our wilting spirits, if we let it. And there is sophia, too, coming from the Christ-within, if only I will be still and listen to it.

Tune into our inner selves, the wisdom that comes from meditation and study of Holy Scripture in humility and without pride. Tune into the wisdom that soaks the universe.

If there was more application of wisdom – love of love, there might be some chance that nations and people might become less **bitter and hasty, and stop marching thro' the breadth of the earth, stop possessing the dwelling places that are not theirs**, stop being terrible and dreadful, and begin to exercise **judgment and dignity that proceeds from wisdom – that is, from love of love.**

The world certainly needs sophia.

Amen.