

Sunday 4 October 2026

Liverpool Parish Church

Evensong on the Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity

OT: Proverbs 2.1-11

NT: 1 John 2.1-17

We read in the book of Proverbs today, 'If you seek it (wisdom) like silver, and search for it as for hidden treasures – then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find knowledge of God'. Where shall wisdom be found? We might ask. The writer of Proverbs tells us that wisdom is given by God and that God stores up sound wisdom for the upright. But, if we read other wisdom texts of the Bible, we notice that wisdom is also inaccessible. It can't be simply found by skill. The book of Job, for instance, suggests that God's wisdom is found even in the world's senselessness. God boasts to Job of the lack of moral order in things, when Job asked for justice. So, the very Bible that celebrates the perception of harmony in things ends up subverting its own language. The more you explore and ask questions, the stranger things might look. We might be disciplined to look for order, but the savagery of the world, and what might appear as empty holes, come into focus, not always with mercy.

It may be after all that 'wisdom' is about recognising this lack of absence of the moral data. We study the world; we observe the news around us only to find that harmony is a useless category. Only yesterday, I was watching the funeral of a mother and her daughter at the ancient Greek Orthodox Church of St Porphyrios in Gaza (two innocent Christian souls) killed by Israeli strikes on their apartment block. Explanation is not going to be useful here. When a death like this happens, as was the death of innocent Israeli civilians 3 years ago, it remains a bruise, a challenge. However, this suggests too that the more we see what's involved in the decision-making process of the world that is guided by ethics, the more we see that it is that kind of rationality that is lacking in the moral world and the fate of people, citizens and subjects like us.

'Prudence will watch over you; and understanding will guard you'. The life of the intellect after all should sharpen, not kill, our moral discomfort in our world. It is not a surprise perhaps that there has been a greater focus on the problem of evil after the Enlightenment, with that greater urge to understand and perhaps control the environment. And this should make it clearer to us now that when we trace more the complex levels of the physical order around us, we have in fact fallen short of looking after our environment too. We find ourselves more vulnerable, in fact, when we train our minds into deeper knowledge. And perhaps, that is where wisdom is to be found, not in explaining skill, or in knowing secrets. But, in coming to acknowledge the scope of the world's tragedy.

This is why those of us involved in higher education are concerned that our universities should not be monochrome; they should not be simply about developing our rational skills in the abstract but reminding us that that skill ultimately will disclose human disorder and tragedy. Any university worth its weight should resist the current pressures to reduce higher

education to training in specific skills. Only if we have a disinterested search for order can we have a truthful vision and an effective activity in our society. We should not give way to easy answers – or what we might think ‘makes sense’. People often point to the fact that religion became less attractive after the Enlightenment because it provides second-rate explanation. That is an irony today! For those who disregard religion today are the ones providing that second-rate explanation too.

The book of proverbs says, ‘you will understand the fear of the Lord and find knowledge of God’. Whatever that means, it does not mean that the fear of the Lord provides better explanations to the morally outrageous events around us. What the Bible is doing is telling us that behind all the tragedy and chaos, there is a boundless gift. Considering this, we don’t ask what is the explanation to the tragedies around us; instead, we ask, what is the future? What do we make of this? What do we hope for? How do we connect with the grace of God’s reality amid the chaos? And St John suggests in his first letter this evening brings the Christian response to this: ‘if anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and he is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but for the sins of the whole world’. For the Christian, the discovery of what we may be is bound to the memory of how, through risk and agony, in the human and creaturely story of Jesus of Nazareth, God bring to birth a new human community, freed from the constraints of race and status, where everyone can claim a common hope and liberty. For this reason, St Paul calls the hanged criminal on the cross, ‘the power and wisdom of God’ – which is ‘a folly to the Greeks’, who looked for a clear harmonious order emanating from the ‘One’.

Of course, faith can often slip back into explanation, which is why the use of the modern intellect *is* important for faith, so that we don’t slip into pseudo-explanations of optimistic piety. This demands our reflection and can be fruitful if we accept vulnerability in the process.

And on this feast day of St Francis, we cannot go without thinking again about what makes us fail to see the conditions of peace, especially in the Holy Land. Francis reminds us that for peace to settle, there is only one condition, and that is poverty of spirit – that vulnerability again. It is this poverty of spirit that allows us to listen to one another, even to the enemy. Poverty of spirit that requires us to be silent for the other to be heard truthfully, even if we disagree with them. God’s justice can be established if we are silent enough and able to put aside the noisy urge for power that is everywhere filling the streets of Jerusalem. May St Francis pray for us and for the Holy Land that we might find that wisdom in the face of the crucified Christ.

Fr Yazid Said