

*The wisdom of worship*

In our recent sermons on the Letter of James we have noted his concern for practical living, for how we act as Christians. For James it is not enough to believe, to have faith – faith has to be practiced, worked out so that it makes a difference to our lives. And with that in mind we've noted that the letter contains echoes of what is called the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament. These are books like Proverbs which are concerned with the practicalities of everyday living. Life, after all can be random and uncertain. The world is an unpredictable and sometimes dangerous place. So how do we negotiate it so that we live to the full? This is the concern of Wisdom Literature: how we live wisely and well. And James echoes that concern when he begins today's passage with a question: 'Who is wise and understanding among you?' And he then goes on to distinguish between two different kinds of wisdom: what he calls wisdom that comes from below and wisdom that comes from above. And guess that you could say that wisdom from below thinks it's very wise but is in fact profoundly foolish and destructive, while the wisdom from above seems absurd and foolish but is actually the key to living well. And what is the difference between the two? What are the key characteristics of these two kinds of wisdom? Well, we are told that the wisdom from above is pure, and peaceable – whereas wisdom from below is prone to envy and selfish ambition and it leads to disorder and wickedness of every kind.

So we catch glimpses of both kinds, but I would suggest that there is one phrase here in this passage which cuts to the heart of true wisdom and that marks it out from the folly of earthly wisdom. It comes in verse 13 where James refers to 'the gentleness born of wisdom'. And that phrase is echoed in verse 17 which speaks of wisdom from above as 'gentle, willing to yield'. And the word for 'gentleness' in verse 13 is also translated as 'meekness' - indeed it is the same word that is used by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount when he declares, 'blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth'. So Wisdom from above involves meekness, but what is that? Indeed is meekness even a quality to be desired?

Well, one thing is for sure and that is that meekness is not weakness. In the Old Testament we read that Moses was 'the meekest man in all the earth' and he was certainly no pushover. But if meekness isn't weakness what is it?

Well, a starting place might be verse 7 of chapter 4 which tells us to ‘submit to God’ and maybe that gives us a clue. The meekness that embodies true wisdom begins with submission to God, with taking off our shoes and bowing before God - but it doesn’t stop there. The description of Wisdom being ‘willing to yield’ means being willing to submit not only to God but to others too. In other words it would seem that there is something aggressive, something arrogant and self-aggrandizing about the wisdom from below which leads to conflict and dispute, while there is a gentleness, a submissiveness about the wisdom from above that issues in peace. But doesn’t that raise more questions? After all, isn’t a ‘spirit of submission’ just a kind of weakness? Doesn’t a ‘yielding spirit’ turn us all into doormats? And haven’t women had enough of being told to submit to men? Haven’t workers had enough of being told to submit to bosses? Indeed hasn’t a secular, non-religious world had enough of being told to submit to God?

Well, here I would suggest to you that in fact true meekness combines two things: it combines a readiness to submit and to defer to others, with an inner strength and self-assurance. These two things, an ability to submit on the one hand, and inner strength and self-assurance on the other: these are the ingredients of true meekness. And where do we see such a combination? What does it look like?

Well, I’d direct you to the Old Testament, not to the figure of Moses but to a figure who appears in our reading from Proverbs. What we find there is a description of a ‘capable wife’, and I wonder how you reacted to that passage when we read it just now. Especially I’d love to know how the women reacted to it. Maybe you found it patronising, this picture of a wife who provides food for her household and tasks for her servant girls. Maybe that description of her as ‘far more precious than jewels’ made you squirm. Maybe you were reminded of a current candidate for the US presidency who after a string of sexist and misogynist comments reassured us that he ‘cherishes’ women.

Well, maybe - but granted that this passage was written back in the mists of time before the days of feminism and women’s liberation, I would suggest that it is actually pretty enlightened. Here is a woman who, according to the custom of the day, doubtless submits to her husband. And yet we are told that ‘the heart of her husband trusts in her’, so clearly she is a strength to him. And yes, many of her responsibilities are certainly domestic – she cooks and she sows and feeds. Yet we are also told that ‘She considers a field and buys it;

with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard', so clearly as well as a wife she is also a business woman and entrepreneur. And then comes this wonderful summary towards the end of the passage which reads, 'Strength and dignity are her clothing and she laughs at the time to come.' Isn't that great? For all her submission and deference as a woman of her time she is also a person of strength and dignity who is at peace and confident in her world and able to face the future joyfully. And it's that intriguing combination of submission and strength, I would suggest, that displays true meekness and is a model for wise living. True meekness leaves us strong, strong enough to submit to God and to submit to another when required, when appropriate.

But what of us? How do we become meek? It's not enough just to tell us that we need to learn to submit and learn to be strong. How is meekness fashioned and formed in us so that it becomes part of our characters? Well, I would suggest to you that we become meek by practice. Practice makes perfect. And I would suggest that there is one particular practice that Christians do regularly which is an exercise in meekness. And the practice I refer to, one we do over and over again, week after week, is worship: the act of worship that we engage in every Sunday morning. Tomorrow evening we are holding the first meeting of our Worship Committee and this morning therefore I want to think briefly of how worship shapes and forms us and moulds our characters. And specifically I want to think about how in our liturgy we find the vital ingredients that blend submission with a strong self-assurance.

So think about it for a moment. We gather here to worship and we approach this one we call God. We acknowledge this Creator, this Father, this Mother, this Holy One, this transcendent one, this sovereign over all, in whom we live and move and have our being. And before such a God we bow. Whether inwardly or outwardly we get down on our knees, we take off our shoes. Here is reverence, here is humility in the presence of the one before whom human pride and glory fade. And the crucial thing is that as we do this, again and again, week by week, there is formed within us a disposition, an inclination to bow, to kneel, to take off our shoes. And without that, how can we learn to submit and to defer to one another? Without the ability to bow before God how can we learn to contain our rivalry and jealousies and become peacemakers, and how will we learn to show reverence and respect for the earth?

Then the service proceeds and next we confess our sin, our failings. And is that not an exercise in humility if it is true and conscious? Here, before the holy One, we acknowledge our failures, laying open our darkness and exposing it to the light. Here once again we bow - here once again we are humbled, this time not by our littleness but by our guilt. And can there be peace on earth, and reconciliation, if we cannot learn to confess our sins? Confession, however, is not all for then there follows what we call absolution, the assurance that we are forgiven. We receive the good news that we are loved and valued unconditionally and so prized by God that he has bought us out of our self-imposed exile through the death of God's Son. Here we are told to un-bow our heads, to raise our eyes, to get up off our knees and to stand for God values us infinitely more than sin could ever devalue us. There is the strange blend of submission and strength that bleeds into meekness.

Or think of the offering towards the end of the service. In the offering we acknowledge our dependence on God, that we have nothing but what we have received and this blows away human pretension and arrogance. However clever and sophisticated we may be, however impressive our science and technology, we are creatures forever dependent upon the provision of a gracious God. But again, that is only one side. At the offering there is also a recognition of human responsibility. As we make our offerings we are affirmed as God's partners in the world. We are empowered as we offer our resources as God's so-workers for his Kingdom. Again, submission and strength come together.

Lastly, of course, there is Holy Communion – again an exercise in meekness. Think about it. In Communion we come with empty hands, nothing in them, in utter submission, waiting to be fed. We come acknowledging again the Giver from whom we receive our lives and upon whom we depend totally. We defer to our Maker, our Saviour. But again – that is only one side. At the table we are also named as friends of God, valued friends in whom God takes infinite delight and without whom God will not keep the feast. In Holy Communion, to adapt some words of Leonard Cohen, 'we have the honour of his presence, and by that honour have our own restored...' To come to the table with hands out-held is an act of submission but it is also an honouring, an empowering, an ennobling. At the table, once again, with the woman of wisdom, we are 'clothed in strength and dignity and we can afford to laugh at tomorrow'.

Friends, there is a wisdom from above, a godly wisdom that to all the world appears foolish. And there is a worldly wisdom that despite our technological genius leads to conflict and tragedy with which we are all too familiar. In such a world it is the alchemy of liturgy, our regular pattern of worship that combines submission and self-assurance into meekness. And it is such meekness that can enable us to live peaceably and wisely and well. Amen.

Holy and gracious God,  
eternal, living Lord.

We your gather people gather here to day  
to give you thanks and praise.

O God you are the source of all wisdom.

Your ways are true and just and lead to life.

And you have shown us what is good,  
the things that lead to peace and to human flourishing.

You have come in Jesus, who revealed to us  
the ways of your kingdom,

the upside down, topsy turvy life of those who follow

the one who is the way, the truth and the life.  
O God we praise you.  
Forgive us that we have preferred  
the wisdom of the world to the foolishness  
of life in your realm.  
Forgive us that we have been led astray  
by ways that lead to conflict and to violence  
and have turned away from the ways that lead to peace.  
O God, have mercy upon us and forgive us, we pray.  
Re-clothe us in our rightful minds,  
Redirect our steps and refashion our actions  
that our lives may be part of the life of your Kingdom.  
People of God, hear the good news that God is gracious,  
God's love outreaches our failure and folly  
and so live the life of the forgiven and the free.  
We pray on Jesus' name and in his words we pray together, saying...

Loving God,  
we give thanks of the wisdom  
of saints and sages throughout the ages,  
for those who have lived the faith,  
for those who have combined that strange  
mixture of weakness and strength that is the hallmark of the meek.  
We give thanks for what we learn from the refugees  
and the dispossessed whose plight surrounds us.  
We give thanks for courage and determination,

for human fortitude and resilience,  
for the determination to seek a fuller life.  
O God help us to learn the ways of your kingdom  
from those who are poor and the refuse of the world...  
And we praise you for acts of kindness and compassion  
that have been demonstrated,  
for wherever human dignity and worth  
have been upheld and affirmed.  
And God bring an end we pray to this nightmare  
of war and suffering and refugees.  
Bless, we pray, your Church.  
Teach us to resist the devil, to resist the lure of evil  
and the wisdom that comes from below,  
And form in us the gentleness that is born of true wisdom.  
Bless we pray those of us in special need today:  
We remember especially the sick and the dying,  
the anxious and the depressed,  
the bereaved and the lost.  
And be to them a refuge and a strength.  
We pray all these things in Jesus' name  
And go the glory of your name. Amen.