

Sunday 4 August 2024, Trinity 10 Matins
Job 28, with reference to Ecclesiastes chs 1 & 12
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Here at Matins we have been looking together at the book of Job. We have seen it to be a book concerned with the deep existential questions of life. Last week we considered how it might shape our theology and our personal faith with its prophecy of the resurrection. This week we come to another of the deep questions: *Where shall wisdom be found? and where is the place of understanding?* Now Job is not the only book of the Bible which addresses this question. We also see it in Ecclesiastes where the writer—some have said it was King Solomon—says this: *I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven: this sore travail hath God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith.* We are forever exercised with the question of wisdom, he says. And, I suppose he is right. Whether consciously or unconsciously we seek the know both ourselves and the world around us. We attempt to make decisions that are considered and wise. We want to do right, even if our understanding of right contains quite a lot of self-interest. Sometimes ‘good’ is defined as ‘what gets me ahead.’

That this is so should be a warning to us. Our search for wisdom and understanding can so easily be selfish. We seek to be wise to achieve our goals. We seek to understand so that we can win. ‘Winning at life’, I have heard it said. Wisdom, in this case, is something we define. It gets me what I want, therefore it is wise. Solomon, who knew more than most about getting and keeping wealth and power, recognises this kind of wisdom for what it is. *I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly: I perceived that this also is vexation of spirit. For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.* What I get for myself is grievous to me. It is madness and folly. In other words, what I get for myself rots. I accumulate, both internally and externally, and it goes to waste because it has not made me happy. If you don’t know this feeling, you have either been very lucky or you haven’t been paying attention.

Now Job doesn’t agree with Ecclesiastes, at least not entirely. For the writer of Job, wisdom is something to be sought for its inherent value. Yet it is unspeakably difficult to find. *Whence then cometh wisdom? and where is the place of understanding? Seeing it is hid from the eyes of all living, and kept close from the fowls of the air. Destruction and death say, We have heard the fame thereof with our ears.* Destruction and death have merely heard of wisdom; the whisper of it has reached even to hell. But where is it? *Man knoweth not the price thereof; neither is it found in the land of the living. The depth saith, It is not in me: and the sea saith, It is not with me.* Okay, so it can’t be found in the land of the living, that is in the natural world. It isn’t in the deep ocean or hidden in a cave in the earth. *It cannot be gotten for gold, neither shall silver be weighed for the price thereof.* Well, you can’t buy it, and even if you could you couldn’t afford it. *No mention shall be made of coral, or of pearls: for the price of wisdom is above rubies.*

If it can’t be found by looking and it can’t be bought, even with rubies, how am I to get it? The perspective of Ecclesiastes is that one can acquire wisdom by diligence and learning, but that it will not satisfy. The perspective of Job is that you can’t even get it. Now, if Job is right and I can’t

get wisdom, why should I look for it? And there's the rub; I cannot help but look for wisdom. I cannot help but seek after understanding. I cannot not want to know. It is my nature to search far and wide for wisdom. But what am I to do if what wisdom I think I've found makes me miserable and true wisdom is beyond my reach?! Enter God. To Solomon—let's say it is Solomon-- *Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.* Don't worry about whatever wisdom you may have gained; it doesn't signify. The only thing that matters is whether you have feared God, trusted God, and kept his commandments. You can be a fool, and if you have loved and tried to please God, it will be just as well with you as if you had found all the wisdom of the world. Everything you thought was important in life boils down to this one thing: fear God and keep his commandments.

And here Job agrees. Entirely. *Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.* That thing you couldn't find in the depths of the earth, that the sea did not know, that was more valuable than the finest gold and more precious than rubies. It was before you all along: fear the lord and depart from evil. Fear God and keep his commandments. You see, when we try to accumulate for ourselves human wisdom and when we think we've got it all figured out we run the risk of making ourselves into an idol- or at least our own feeble minds and abilities. What both Job and Ecclesiastes highlight is human inability and ineffectiveness. Wisdom is not ours to discover or to invent, much less to hold onto like precious treasure. It is beyond our grasp because it comes from beyond us. Its source is God and its aim is God. What distinguishes true wisdom from the so-called wisdom of the world is that its purpose is to direct us away from ourselves to reverence and awe of God and to imitation of his divine nature.

St Paul teaches us that the divine nature of God, his character and how wisdom are to be found in Jesus Christ. As he writes in his first letter to the Corinthians, *Jesus Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God.* He identifies wisdom with Jesus. He is very embodiment of God's eternal knowledge and understanding. What Job and Ecclesiastes strove to describe, what they said could not be found but in God is made known in Christ. Wisdom, so longed for, has come down to earth to live. 'Fear God and keep his commandments' becomes in the mind of the apostle 'Love the Lord Jesus and seek to please him.' That is wisdom, for he is wisdom. And when we have him, we have what everyone by nature so desperately seeks but struggles to find. Do you have him? Do you know him? Has he called you to himself? For he is not in the depth, and he cannot be bought, even for rubies. But he is here and he gives himself freely. *But where shall wisdom be found? and where is the place of understanding? Unto them which are called... Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God...* Rejoice if you have found this wisdom. And if you do not yet know him, just ask. He has never turned away anyone who came to him in faith. In Jesus Christ you will have the wisdom you seek. And all your restless searching can finally come to an end. Amen.