

## **The Fear of God is the Beginning of Wisdom.**

*A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.*

*11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost. Proper 15, Year B. August 20, 2006. (Text: Proverbs 9:1-6.)*

One of my chief pleasures in life is reading newspapers. At our house we get the *Denver Post* every morning, and most days we stop somewhere and pick up both Aspen papers. Sometime during the day I read the *New York Times* on-line, but I usually start off with the *Post* at breakfast, then read a little more after lunch, and finish it up after supper —at which time I also read the local rags. Of course, I don't read every word, but I scan the headlines, read the lead articles, sample the editorials, check out the baseball scores, look at the business section to see what's happening with the economy and guess whether our retirement fund is growing or shriveling, then finally I read *all* the cartoons, even the ones that aren't funny. (Yes, I obviously have way too much time on my hands!) At least once a week – usually on Sunday – I'll take a look at some of the advice columns in the Lifestyles section.

It would appear that if you want guidance, all you need is a Sunday subscription to a big city newspaper. Ann Landers is gone, but we have her successor, "Ask Amy," along with good old "Dear Abby," to tell us how to handle awkward situations in love and marriage. And now there's also "Consejos" (which I think means something like "*counsel*" in Spanish) to guide people through the minefields of cross-cultural dating. Judith Martin, *a.k.a.* "Miss Manners," is still around to give advice on what kind of thank-you notes to send for any occasion and to tell us when it's o.k. to eat pie with a spoon. In addition, there are columns for parents, teenagers, investors, weight watchers, hikers, bridge players, gardeners, and electronic gadget nuts. And I haven't even mentioned the daily horoscope.

The proliferation of advice and guidance columns in the papers and on line suggests that we who live in America today are people fundamentally uncertain of ourselves. We're not sure how to cope with life. We're anxious and looking for help.

Clearly, we have huge respect for brain-power. You need intelligence to succeed in our fast-changing Third Millennium society because there's a lot of new stuff to learn every day. We have our mantras, "Knowledge is power" and "The internet is the information superhighway." So, bright people try to master as much information as possible. But the effort to keep up just makes us more anxious, because there's so much information, misinformation, and so-called "informed opinion" out there on the World Wide Web that most of us – even if we're well-educated – can't sort it out. Consequently, people seem more uncertain, edgy, and worried than they used to be... and hungrier for guidance. —It's as if we're saying, "Somebody please tell us how to handle this confusing world!"

We admire brains. We collect information. We realize that knowledge is power. But the solution to our collective anxiety is to be found elsewhere —not in the mastery of facts or the pursuit of new technology, but in the acquisition of *wisdom*.

Every age and every civilization of the past has looked for wisdom, though some have searched for it more thoroughly and prized it more highly than others. The Hebrews, the Chinese, and the Greeks cherished wisdom. The Romans were more interested in law, engineering, and power politics. I've thought a lot about this, and I've concluded that American society has a more or less "Roman" approach to life.

Compare the Romans with the Hebrews. You may recall the Old Testament story of Solomon's prayer. Solomon had followed his father David as king of Israel. God asked the young king what he wanted him to give him. Solomon didn't ask for riches or for power over his enemies. Instead, he asked for *wisdom*. Can you imagine Caesar doing that?

Our first lesson this morning came from the Book of Proverbs, one of the Wisdom Books of the Old Testament. It's the invitation of Lady Wisdom to all who are willing to listen to her. She says, "*You that are simple, turn in here!* To those without sense she says, 'Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight.'" To have wisdom is "to walk in the way of insight." We

want to live a centered and peaceful life in the midst of a rapidly changing, culturally polarized, and often confusing world. To do that, we need Lady Wisdom.

The Jewish tradition we find in the Bible, the tradition that shaped Jesus and trained Paul, understood wisdom as *inherently practical*. Wisdom showed how to live a good and meaningful life, especially in terms of various personal relationships —starting with God, and then moving down the social pyramid from the king to the aristocracy, to people superior to you, people subordinate to you, and your spouse, your children, your neighbors, and your servants. Wisdom showed how to deal with those who were stronger than you as well as those who were weaker. The Book of Proverbs was a wisdom textbook for school-boys in ancient Israel. (Alas, there were no “school-girls” then, which is surprising since Wisdom was always portrayed as female. Maybe they thought girls came by their wisdom naturally, while boys had to be taught! You ladies in the congregation would probably agree with that.) The Book of Proverbs taught young Israelite gentlemen that the wise differ from fools in practical ways: the wise control their tongues and consider the power of their words; they also honor silence. They control their passions and practice moderation in all things. They learn how to work hard and be thrifty. And they have a goal for their lives. Above all, the wise grasp the truth of their own ignorance. They understand that they don’t “know it all.”

Tom Ehrich writes that wisdom in the Bible means more than shrewdness, “more than common sense, more than success in problem solving.” It demands patience with oneself, and requires an effort to live with ambiguity. Wisdom recognizes that we don’t live in a “black and white” universe where right and wrong are always self-evident.

I imagine just about all of you know the Bible verse that says, “*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,*” even if you don’t know that it’s Psalm 111, verse 10. For the Old Testament writers, the search for wisdom was the true quest of faith. The only way to wisdom was through a relationship with God grounded in awe. (“Awe” or “profound reverence” is the real meaning of the word “fear” when we say “*the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.*”) And we don’t practice “fear of the Lord” in order to win arguments or to prove that we’re better than other people. Awe of God is the very “beginning of wisdom.” It opens the door to the practical understanding of how to live a meaningful life.

Awe of God, respect for God’s Word, dread of offending him, response to his love, and eagerness to do his will are the starting point for human happiness and right relationships. In a time when we’re anxious and edgy and looking for guidance, there’s no more practical advice to give either our children or our friends than to tell them to seek the wisdom of God. It’s more useful than a column in the newspaper, a hot new website, a self-help book, a guide to the stock market, or the latest “guru” to hit Aspen.

We Christians believe that the wisdom of God is summarized and incarnated in the person of Jesus Christ and is expressed in an awesome way through his Cross. ...Yes, through his Cross. Paul, who was shaped by the wisdom of the Hebrew Scriptures, called Christ “*the wisdom of God and the power of God.*” He wrote in one of his letters, “*I resolved to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ crucified... a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this world.*”

The imitation of Christ, who gave himself for those he loved, is the most practical wisdom anyone can share. We had a wedding here yesterday afternoon. The priest offers a solemn blessing of the bride and groom at the end of the service, and it starts with these words “*Most gracious God, we give you thanks for your tender love in sending Jesus Christ to come among us, to be born of a human mother, and to make the way of the cross to be the way of life.*” This is wisdom: “the way of the cross is the way of life.”

Do you want to have a happier family life? ...*Walk the way of the cross!* Do you want to get along better at work? ...*Walk the way of the cross!* Do you want to overcome your anxieties in this confusing age? ...*Walk the way of the cross!* Do you want to overcome your fear of death and start living an abundant life right now? ...*Walk the way of the cross!*

In the Greek Church, before the reading of the Gospel at the Eucharist, the Deacon cries out, “Wisdom! Wisdom! Let us be attentive!” The Good News *is* wisdom... the best advice anyone can ever get—or give.