

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Proverbs 1:20-33; Psalm 19; Mark 8:27-38; James 3:1-12

Proverbs 1:20-33. The book of Proverbs is wisdom literature, one of three in the Bible (Job and Ecclesiastes being the other two). It is essentially concerned with the shaping of character. Wisdom, to the writer of Proverbs, is not the accumulation of information as much as it is knowing how to act. Its primary theological claim is that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (1:7; 9:10). It basically deals with how one should act in order to be at one with the natural and historical order that God has created. The most striking theological aspect of Proverbs is its personification of Wisdom as a woman (1:20-33).

Proverbs is divided into two parts. The first part is an extended introduction, an essay on wisdom (1:1-9:18). The remainder (10:1-31:31) consists of the actual proverbs. Although there are a few notable exceptions (31:1-31 for example), most of the proverbs are presented as two sentences of parallel construction.

The above means that the Old Testament passage for today is not a proverb but because it is part of the extended introduction, is actually a discourse on wisdom (1:20-33). That wisdom is personified as a woman (1:20-33; 3:13-18; 4:5-9; 7:4; 8:1-36; 9:1-6), threatening disaster upon those who do not heed her instructions. But the basic message of the woman, “Wisdom”, is that one should seek her, find her and possess her as if she were one’s lover. One should fill one’s self with wisdom, so that she expresses herself in all that one does and says and is!

In Proverbs 1:20-33, Wisdom is portrayed as an open-air prophetess calling on people to repent of their folly and to embrace her advice before it is too late. This passage teaches us that wisdom is not the accumulation of data. Nor is it simply gaining more insight on life. Having wisdom is having the capacity, ability and willingness to choose wisely. Wisdom is always the opposite of folly, righteousness the opposite of wickedness. Therefore, having wisdom is to hold the depths of knowledge (vs. 29) or “the fear of the Lord”.

Wisdom is accessed as both gift from God and a human task. Wisdom as gift is seen in 1:7, where the fear of the Lord grows from the grace of God. Wisdom as task is seen in vss. 23-33, which assumes the proactive work of the person to seek wisdom. Thus the task before each person, the lady Wisdom tells us, is to seek wisdom and to both possess it and let it possess you!

Psalm 19 deals with two ways God communicates to us and interacts with us. The first is through creation, and the second is through his Word (the Law). First, creation:

“The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world” (19:1-4).

It is as if the creation itself has a voice that speaks to us, the Psalmist writes. The created order is so vast and so overwhelming, its very existence speaks to us of a Creator who is powerful enough to create such beauty and ordered enough to create such structure.

But God also speaks to us through his written Word. To the Jews, it is the Law through which God speaks. For Christians, it is the scriptures themselves.

“The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandments of the Lord are clear, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether” (19:7-9).

God’s word, spoken or written, revives our spirit; God’s teachings make us wise; God’s truths teach us rightly and cause us to rejoice; God’s expectations enlighten and order our lives. Standing in awe before God makes us centered in God and pure. Thus, relationship with God makes us “true and righteous altogether”.

This is a profound description of the importance of the relationship between lived Word and written Word. To allow one’s self to be bathed with God’s written Word brings one into closer and more dynamic relationship with that lived Word. And the fostering of that lived-out relationship only deepens in insight and in profundity the Word one reads. This is as true in community as it is individually. For this transformation occurs in the private prayer chamber. But it also happens in public worship and study; it is one of the reasons why it is important that the gathered community read the Word out loud to each other!

It is out of this dynamic between living and written Word, and the miracle it works within and among us that Psalm 19 leads us to pray this benediction to our Creator and Living Word:

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my salvation” (19:14).

Mark 8:27-38 is the pivot point around which the book of Mark revolves. It is in Mark 8:27-38 that the clearest testimony is given by the disciples that Jesus is the Messiah (vs. 29) – although Jesus continues to use the term “Son of Man” for himself (vv. 31, 38). It is also here that Jesus first begins to describe what he, as Messiah/Son of Man is going to do and the implications of the same for the future of his disciples (8:31-38). Thus, the reader begins this story of Peter’s confession of Jesus as Messiah as he answers the question, “Who is this Jesus of Nazareth?” And the reader ends this story asking the second question “What has Jesus come to do, and what are the implications of that action for us as his disciples?” Mark will build the remainder of his Gospel upon that second question.

The story begins with Jesus’ question put to the disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” They respond with the many answers they have heard from others (3:27-28). Jesus then zeros in on them. “But who do you say that I am?” Peter responds for all of them, when he replies, “You are the Messiah” (vs. 29)!

To truly appreciate the significance of this line of questioning by Jesus and the disciple's response, one must recognize that up until this point in the Gospel, the essential question that is being asked about Jesus by the crowd, the religious-political leaders and by the disciples, is the question "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him" (4:41)? The reader knows the answer to that question, but none of the characters in Mark's story knows it. The asking of this question builds to a crescendo in the events immediately preceding Jesus' direct challenging of the disciples and Peter's confessional response.

Jesus has hinted the answer to this question in many ways, both through his words and actions. He has fed the 5,000 and then the 4,000. He has calmed the Sea of Galilee. He has healed the blind, raised the dead to life, and committed many astounding miracles. By his words and actions, he has revealed himself as one who practices voluntary austerity (1:16ff, 6:8f). He has intentionally acted to stand in solidarity with the outcast and the poor – particularly through table fellowship (2:16f; 7:25). He has clearly been one who has stood over against the political, economic and religious systems of power in Israel, protesting their practices of inequality and of the building of their power at the expense of the people (2:26, 8:11-13). Finally, he challenges his disciples, "When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect? And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?" And when they responded with the right answers, he replied, "Do you not yet understand?" (8:14-21)

Presumably, even yet, they didn't fully understand who he was. But the disciples' awareness was steadily growing. In the story that immediately precedes Peter's confession, Jesus comes upon a blind man who begs Jesus to heal him. Jesus touches the man's eyes and asks, "Can you see anything?" He replies, "I can see people, but they look like trees, walking". Jesus then touches him again, "and his sight was restored and he saw everything clearly" (v. 25, 8:22-26).

This healing, set in such a strategic position, is not simply about a blind man being healed, for it is the only miracle in Mark that occurs in stages. In the healing of this blind man, the man first receives "fuzzy vision" and then "clear". Thus, in Peter's confession, the disciples only get a "fuzzy" understanding of what it means for Jesus to be "Messiah" or "Son of Man". That is at least a clearer understanding than when they did "not yet understand" at all. But just as a second healing by Jesus gave the man "clear vision", so it will be that clear vision regarding the person and work of Jesus will come to the disciples only after his resurrection from the dead!

"Who do you say I am?" "You are the Messiah".

Peter confesses Jesus as "Messiah". What is significant about Jesus' response is that he doesn't acknowledge Peter's confession. Jesus doesn't affirm his response; instead, he only tells Peter "not to tell anyone about him" (8:30). Intriguingly, although Peter has called Jesus "Messiah", Jesus pointedly continues to refer to himself as "Son of Man" (8:31, 38). What's the difference here? Why does Jesus insist upon calling himself "Son of Man" when Peter has called him "Messiah"? What is it about the person of Jesus that Peter and the disciples still do not understand?

“Messiah”, in Hebrew, means “the Anointed One”. In Hebrew tradition, it did not always refer to the “once and future king” for which Israel waited to set them free. It was primarily used for the kings of Israel and Judah (29 times; cf. II Sam. 1:21). Apparently, the kings of Israel and Judah were called “Messiah” much as Egyptian kings were called “Pharaoh” and Roman emperors “Caesar”. It was once used of a Gentile king, Cyrus of Persia (Isa. 45:1). In postexilic times, after the fall of the two Jewish monarchies, it was used primarily of the high priests who assumed much of the role played by Israel’s former kings (Lev. 4:3, 5, 16; 6:22; Dan. 9:25-26). The point is that “Messiah” was a term used for the one who held political, economic and religious power, ruling over the people and maintaining Israel’s systems. Only in later centuries, close to Rome’s dominance of Israel, did the term come to have the “once and future king” aspect to it – the yearning for God’s anointed one who would wrest power away from Rome and establish God’s kingdom on earth. But whether referring to an historic king or priest, or whether dreaming of a future conqueror, the concept of Messiah was one of a divinely appointed person who would build and sustain the political, economic and religious systems of Israel so that Israel could become even more powerful than was Rome!

I would suggest that Jesus did not want to associate himself with that perspective. His entire ministry to this point had proclaimed in word and deed the exact opposite! He had been the one who practiced voluntary austerity, not built his personal power and wealth. He had stood in solidarity with the outcast and the poor, not with the powerful and wealthy. He had stood against the systems, criticizing them and calling them to biblical accountability for their lust to build their power at the expense of the poor. In essence, Jesus stood against everything that the popular imagination believed Messiah was to be about. He could not call himself “Messiah” even though he was a king!

Rather, according to Mark, Jesus preferred the title, “Son of Man” for himself. But what was the “Son of Man”? The title is used in two ways in the Hebrew Bible. First, it is used simply as a synonym for a male human being – any man (Num. 23:19; Job 35:8; Ezek. 2:1). Second, it is used of an apocalyptic person in Daniel 7:13-14 who is described in strikingly similar language to Revelation 11:15. Daniel wrote, “I saw one like a Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One (that is, God), and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed”.

What is particularly intriguing is that another Jewish prophet writing two centuries before Jesus but after Daniel had been written and after the Hebrew Bible had been completed, also wrote of the “Son of Man”. He was known as Enoch. By 33 A.D., the book of Enoch had become one of the most popular noncanonical books in Jewish literature, highly respected by the Jews.

Building off of Daniel’s introduction, Enoch describes a “Son of Man” who will be God’s Elect One and who, as Daniel had suggested, would be one to whom God would give “dominion and glory and power”. However, Enoch’s description of the character and work of the “Son of Man” was particularly significant, taking a profound shift from the monarchical thrust that “Messiah” had earlier assumed.

Enoch's "Son of Man" is the Elect One who will sit on the throne of glory in order to "try the works" of the righteous and the holy (Enoch 45:3). His concern will not be the accumulation of power and wealth, but the building of justice and equity (chs. 46-48, 62-71). He will remove from their thrones any kings or priests who have persecuted or worked against the poor or weak (46:4-8). He will call forth the practice of a politics of justice, an economics of shared wealth that will eliminate poverty and the building of a people in relationship with God (chs. 46-48). And this will include, not just Jews, but Gentiles, as well. In fact, the Son of Man is called a "light to the Gentiles" (48:4). Most significant, the "Son of Man" will not be a conquering Messiah, but rather a suffering one who will be killed by the systems but will rise triumphant to "sit on the throne of his glory" (62:2-5). It is very clear that it is Enoch's model of the Son of Man that most captured Jesus' understanding of the ministry to which he was called far more fully than did the more triumphalistic image of "Messiah".

This is clearly exhibited in Jesus' next words to Peter. According to Mark, Jesus "began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again" (Mark, 8:31). Peter, stunned by Jesus' words and his clear rejection of the traditional role of the conquering Messiah for the more debatable role of the suffering Son of Man, "took him aside and began to rebuke him" (v. 32). But Jesus, responding to Peter's challenge declared, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (v. 33). Peter would prefer the road to triumphalistic glory, continuing the present political, economic and religious order but with Jesus at its head (and Peter not far behind) rather than the Jewish high priest or the Roman Caesar at its head!

But Jesus would have none of it. He declared to the disciples and to the crowd, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels" (8:34-38).

What Enoch predicts is to be the fate of the Son of Man, Jesus predicts will be the fate of those who follow that Son of Man. If the Son of Man is called by God to eschew the wealth of the world, stand in solidarity with the poor, and confront the world's powers calling for their transformation into God's intentions, then the same task falls to his disciples. Those who wish to "come after him" will have to identify with his subversive effort. And thus, like the Son of Man, they must be willing to accept the inevitable reaction of the systems as those systems seek to wipe them out.

The followers of the "Son of Man" must be willing to "take up their cross and follow him." Only those who are willing to be so shunned, to be persecuted and to die for the realizing of God's intentions for rebuilding humanity will be worthy of the Son of Man. It will be they, and only they, who will join with the Son of Man in his inevitable triumph "when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels". *That* is who Jesus is, and who Jesus' followers are called to be. And *that* is what both he and they are called to do, for only such suffering and

sacrificial death will lead both to resurrection and to the coming of God's kingdom of justice, equity and unity for all humankind!

James 3:1-12. Using teachers in the church as his example (3:1), James develops the idea that what we say and how we say it has a profound impact upon people, either for good or for ill (3:2-5). Therefore, one must speak carefully, with forethought and keen awareness of the harm or good that can be done by our tongue (3:9-12).

In James' practical concern that Christians and the church "walk the walk" as well as "talk the talk", he has thus far called the church to actions of self-control (1:19-26), patient endurance of trials (1:2-12) and acting justly particularly toward the poor (1:27; 2:8-19). The true mark of the Christian is his concrete and practical working for justice, advocating the cause of the poor and working to empower the weak of the world (2:1-17). Now, in this passage, he is adding highly deliberative speech.

Francis of Assisi was alleged to have said to his friars, "Proclaim the gospel in all you do; use words, if absolutely necessary!" In other words, live and act out the gospel, proclaiming it with speech only when it is needed. James would add to that advice, "And when you realize that it is absolutely necessary to explain your faith, speak carefully, concisely and reflectively, recognizing what great damage you can do to newly emerging faith if you speak harshly or critically". *How* you say what you say is as important as *what* you choose to say.

What is intriguing in James' use of illustrations to demonstrate the power of the tongue is that he takes those illustrations from secular sources. Describing speech as the bit of a bridle that turns a powerful horse, he makes allusion to an earlier illustration used by Sophocles ("Antigone" 477). The tongue like a rudder that turns a great ship was first used by Philo ("Allegorical Interpretations" 3:224). The image of the tongue as a small fire that consumes an entire forest is used by Plutarch ("On Garrulousness" 10). It is an indication that James was well read, and felt comfortable using both Gentile (Sophocles, Plutarch) and Jewish (Philo) sources in making his point.

Perhaps the most intriguing allusion in the epistle lesson for today is 3:6. "The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell." The Greek word *kathistatai* can be equally translated as "is placed" (which is passive) or "makes itself" (active). The NRSV translators chose to translate *kathistatai* as passive, suggesting that the tongue is simply a tool of good or evil ("The devil made me do it"). But if translated "makes itself" the whole meaning of the sentence is changed, communicating that the tongue can be a proactive vehicle of evil that makes itself "a world of iniquity" that corrupts both that person and the world around him. So translated, it expresses the uncontrollable and even unconscious depths of evil in us all!

Further, verse 6 refers to the tongue setting "on fire the cycle of nature". The Greek actually states "wheel of existence" or "wheel of birth". The "wheel of existence" is a Greek reference to the cycle of fate through which the ancients believed one's life moves. That wheel, once rolling, inevitably cycles between fortune and misfortune. What James is developing here is that the

misuse of the tongue, unconverted to Christ and welling up out of our unresolved unconscious content, can create such chaos for both ourselves and others that it upsets one's cycle of life, turns its fortune into misfortune, and sets all of life "on fire by hell!"

What is remarkable in all that James writes here is his profound understanding of both the existence of and the power of the unconscious. He stresses here that, in essence, the tongue is the doorway to the soul, in that the tongue is capable of communicating both virtue and vitriol. With our tongue, our own unresolved unconscious contents are exposed, and our consequent willingness to act oppressively, unilaterally and exploitively gets revealed as lying behind our covered up niceties. So exposed, we become aware of the power each of us has to destroy the world around us. Therefore, deal with your tongue with both caution and with respect!

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