

“Wisdom, leading us in playfulness” a sermon based on Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31 preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church, Dunedin, New Zealand on 16 June 2019.

Years ago my father took me into a native bush not far from where we lived, not far from where he grew up, on the banks of the Waikato river. I think his mother had taken him on the same path when he was my age. His mother was a botanist who loved plants. So my father introduced me to the plants and leaves in this small forest. More than 200 plants were used medicinally by Maori – harakeke, rata, kawakawa. He showed me kawakawa leaves used internally to fix stomach problems and more, and externally to heal cuts and bruises and more. As we passed trees I had seen many times, he invited me to see the trees in a different way.

I want to use that experience as an analogy for how we experience and speak of God. God is not one to be analysed by microscope or telescope. To be scrutinised as one would an object. God is more like that forest. And the doctrine of God is more like helping us see what is there. It's more like this (he lifts his hands and his eyes and looks around), than this (he brings out binoculars). It's more what we touch and smell and see and taste, than what we look at from a distance as something over there. In the book of Acts we read that Paul stood before the philosophers and theologians in Athens, and said: “For ‘In God we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said.’” In God ...

Now who we choose to guide us, makes a difference to what we see. If an old Maori woman takes us through the forest, we are likely to see different things than if we go with a fast runner or a mountain biker or even a scientist or a tour guide or bird-watcher. If a curious child takes us through the forest, we are likely to see different things. We may have been in the forest many times, but with a different guide our eyes are opened to different parts of it. I invite us this morning to go within, to explore within.

Today our guide is the figure of Woman Wisdom. We meet her in the book of Proverbs and she appears also in parts of the New Testament. Woman Wisdom testifies to what is true and noble and right. Her paths are straight and just. Where do we meet Woman Wisdom? In the busiest part of life. “On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand, beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she takes her stand.”

Maybe a surprising place to find wisdom. I’ve heard caricatures of people looking for wisdom by climbing a mountain to find an old bearded monk who has lived a solitary existence in a cave for many years. I’ve heard stories of people looking for wisdom by going off into the desert for a long period of private contemplation. I’ve heard stories of people looking for wisdom by going to religious countries.

By contrast, we find Woman Wisdom in the busiest part of our town. Where people buy and sell and walk and talk and work and study and play. Woman Wisdom speaks on the corner outside this church, in the space between the University library and the Union building, in the school hallways when pupils throng from one class room to another, in the courtroom foyer melee. Woman Wisdom calls to everyone – the wise and the foolish. Loudly, she offers her companionship to anyone.

And in their busy lives, she points people to the stars, inviting us to see what is happening in a cosmic context. Woman Wisdom invites us to connect everyday virtue with a cosmic order, to see our everyday patterns in a cosmic matrix. She brings the longest of perspectives - Woman Wisdom is the first created. She was there at the beginning of the earth, before everything else except God.

And she does so playfully. When God created the earth, Wisdom was God’s joyful companion. A playful child. A happy observer. A light-hearted wise commentator. To walk in the straight and righteous paths of Wisdom, is to connect with deep, primal joy. Inviting us into a life of flourishing.

In this forest, with Woman Wisdom as our guide, what do we see? First, the irreducibly social aspect of creaturely life. She calls out from the busy corner in the public square and highlights the deeply social and communal structures of the created world. Woman Wisdom shows how the multiple ways we are connected reach into the structures of creation itself. Theoretical physicist and theologian John Polkinghorne writes this in his book *Science and the Trinity*:

“With physics moving in a more holistic direction, we might expect by analogy the need to challenge the individualistic atomism that is so characteristic of contemporary thinking about human nature. If electrons are counter-intuitively entangled with each other, we may need to contemplate the possibility that persons participate in some greater solidarity than atomised Western society is able to recognize. Such an insight is surely consonant with the Christian understanding of the community of the faithful as the Body of Christ, constituting a web of relationality vastly more comprehensive than the one-to-one exchange of I and Thou.”

Fulness of life is not possible for the isolated individual who surveys life from a place of cool detachment. In God, we live and move and have our being together. God is deeply and intimately connected with creation and all of creation is deeply connected with God. Woman wisdom relishes that connection. These interconnections happen in the most ordinary patterns of creaturely life. Woman wisdom reminds us that our creaturely roots are deeply social and communal.

Secondly, Woman Wisdom conveys the divine invitation to play, part of the human response to God. Work and play mix and merge into one joyful response to God. Joy and play and delight alongside sorrow and grief and loss. We're invited to winsome cheer and joyful delight rather than judgement and blame. The delights of wisdom are not knowledge driven by data and calculation. The delights of wisdom are a deep disposition, an attitude, the capacity to see the kawakawa leaves. Wonder and witness are twin energies in the life of faith, born of Wisdom who rejoices daily at the side of God.

Much of this is consonant with the doctrine of the Trinity, emphasising relationality. Imagine that doctrine not as a set of propositions, but as a forest, in which Woman Wisdom invites us to notice and wonder and rejoice. Imagine reading the Nicene Creed or any Creed like that. The creed is written to address questions of the early centuries of the Church, but it is much more than that. Imagine it as a delightful forest, in which light plays, and images invite, and through image piled on image, we are invited to see a pattern, to see the stars. Imagine approaching the creed playfully, not analytically.

Light from light, true god from true god, not made, not manufactured, pitching a tent in Jesus, born of Mary, born of Spirit, the Holy Spirit, the giver of life. Creeds are not answers to multi-choice questionnaires of what is right and what is wrong. They are invitations into a forest, to notice and see what is around us, the one in whom we live and move and have our being. As is the doctrine of the Trinity, or any other doctrine for that matter. And they as much about what god is not as about what god is. Indeed, if we keep asking ourselves the question - in what god do I not believe - we will can go a long way into the forest.

Atheism as a quest and not an end-point, as a question mark not an exclamation mark, such atheism can be a wise playful route to faith.

Woman Wisdom. Calling to us. In the busiest place. To sense in whom we live and move and have our being. Triune God.

KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN

called to be a community following Jesus



Knox Church
449 George Street
Dunedin
New Zealand
Ph. (03) 477 0229
www.knoxchurch.net

Kerry Enright: 027 467 5542, minister@knoxchurch.net