

Sermon, Evensong, Last Sunday after Trinity, 26th October 2014

Ecclesiastes 11-12

Sometimes, most of the time, well virtually always we don't reason logically from first principles. We don't reason logically about everything for very good reason; it takes effort and time. If we considered every decision we made this way many of us wouldn't get much past reasoning whether or not to get out of bed in the morning. We make the vast majority of decisions based on learned general rules which serve us pretty well. These are habitual, picked up over a lifetime of observing that last time X happened I did Y and it turned out alright. Psychologists call these heuristics. Most other people call them rules of thumb.

We all have these rules and general principles for life; we couldn't function without them. And they are implicitly related to our general attitude about the universe we inhabit and encounter and our place in it. Since they dictate so many of our decisions they are a fundamental part of our wisdom. The decisions we make using them are never going to be perfect, we are after all *'only human'*, but they are likely, most of the time, to be good enough.

The first scripture reading set for tonight is from Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes forms part of the Wisdom literature found in the Bible and the book broadly advises how to live happily in an uncertain world when humans are too puny to really change very much. It contains several proverbs; short sentences that briefly encapsulate wise actions and understanding. And proverbs are rules of thumb. Ways of navigating our way through life which will more often than not turn out for the good. And I think these proverbs still tell us something about what wise rules of thumb we might hold.

Most of the proverbs from tonight's reading would be directly relevant in a context where the vast majority of people were engaged in subsistence agriculture. Such a living is highly uncertain. Crops succeed or fail due to factors which are largely outside of the control of the farmer. As such Ecclesiastes encourages diversification; grow seven or even eight different things and in the evenings do something useful. Some of these will work, some of them won't but you're less likely to starve if you do a little bit of several things than just one. Put another way; don't put all your eggs in one basket.

We also have proverbs about the weather in the reading, providing us with the deep insight that *'When the clouds are full, they empty rain on the earth.'* Advice is also given not to sow when it's windy, because the seed that you scatter on your fields will go everywhere and less of it will grow, and not to harvest when it's about to rain, because more of the harvest will spoil (noting of course the previous advice that rain is more likely if it happens to be cloudy.)

All this of course raises a question. Why should two and a half thousand year old agricultural advice from scripture be relevant to us here in Gosforth today? The closest most of us get to agriculture is growing the odd vegetable in our garden or allotment and in the event that it doesn't work, well there's always Sainsbury's.

It's important because it reminds us that the wisdom we discover in Scripture is often simple, practical and mundane. Wisdom is as much, if not more, of doing the simple and everyday things well as it is about successfully navigating the complex and specific. I think we often worry about how the big complex things might go wrong but in reality we mess up more often by taking insufficient care over things that should be relatively simple.

This reverence for the simple and practical is further highlighted when we are told that *'Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.'* I think most new curates freshly released from theological college sympathise with this sentiment. This isn't a complete rejection of academic endeavour, but it is a warning for us as individuals and as a church against getting stuck in perpetual abstract discussion at the expense of putting some of the wisdom gained into practice.

All the wisdom of both the chapters in tonight's reading and the preceding ten chapters is summed up in the epilogue thus; *'Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone.'* Being aware of God in everything we do is the basis of all other wisdom. It is the basic, simple thing that we so often forget with the result that so many other parts of our common life together go wrong.

Fearing God, keeping his commandments and doing our Christian duty is not just a matter of showing up and paying attention in church. Church going is necessary to the Christian life but it is not sufficient. Awareness of and a desire to be obedient to God should, like all the other heuristics that rule our lives, become gradually evermore habitual in us in all aspects of our lives.

Christianity holds that God is present at all time and in all places. Therefore that God is due our acknowledgement and praise at all times and in all places should become one of our rules of thumb. Why should we waste time and effort questioning whether or not our faith in God should inform the particular situation we're faced with? Since we believe God ultimately created and cares for whatever it is in front of us our faith in God must be relevant. And if what is in front of us is merely the washing up this still provides us with opportunity recognise God and give thanks for the meal recently consumed that caused this task to be necessary.

That when it is cloudy it is likely to rain we take to be such a self-evident truth that we barely consider it to be wisdom it is so simple, ingrained in us, obvious and implicitly understood. That the universe's existence requires a creator who is due our thanks and praise should be similarly simple, ingrained, obvious and implicitly understood.

The first step which is basic to everything we do in our lives should be the recognition of God. It is from this habit, or heuristic or rule of thumb that all the rest of our spiritual lives and spiritual understanding flows. It's boringly simple, obvious and everyday. But then most wisdom is.