

“Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?” (St. Matthew 22.12)

How would you describe wisdom? If we think of a fantasy series like the Lord of the Rings, we think of the wise Wizards – probably because this word means “wise one”. In a good story, the wise swoops in at a good moment to nudge the protagonist in the right direction, or turns out to have been masterminding behind the scenes the whole time. In a modern work setting, we might see the wise as the co-worker whose been there the longest and knows their way around every problem. We know that we are able to learn something from the wise, we know that they will often point us in the right direction, or what they suggest will not result in disaster. The Oxford Dictionary describes it as “the quality of having experience, knowledge, and good judgment; the quality of being wise.” Experience, knowledge, and good judgement. Especially when it is a combination of these.

Having the knowledge alone is not the key to wisdom. As anybody who’s served in the military knows from their own experience, you *do not* trust the new lieutenant with a compass as a matter of self-preservation. These young officers are fresh out of university and their training courses. They have the theoretical knowledge but have no practical experience. They’re going to get lost. Wisdom is a combination of the theoretical with the practical, *and* the ability to use that knowledge and experience critically. William Shakespeare famously wrote: “The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool.” This is our worldly understanding of wisdom, but there is another.

Our lessons today are trying to teach us about this other kind of wisdom: Godly wisdom. What does it mean to be wise in the eyes of God? First, we are given a picture about what Wisdom looks like in the Proverbs of Solomon. Our reading this morning, in chapter 9, comes at the end of the first major section of the Proverbs, a section that is all about introducing the reader to Wisdom. Wisdom is personified as a woman likely for two reasons: first is that it is a feminine noun in Hebrew, and second is an ancient personification of wisdom as female. In Greek, wisdom is *Sophia*, and there is a whole world of Greek philosophical discussion on wisdom. Our portrayal of the woman Wisdom in Proverbs is that she is the picture of prudence, strength, honour, and riches. She has built a perfect palatial house with seven pillars; she has laid out a great feast; she sends her servants to cry out to the town to invite all the simple in for her feast. “Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine that I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight.” She opens up an invitation for those who are simple to come in and become wise. Later in this poem, this wisdom is contrasted to Folly, who only serves to make the simple foolish and lacking in sense, strength, honour, and riches. Each of these ladies open their doors and call from the high places, but what each offer to the simple are vastly apart.

Turning from this brief introduction to Wisdom and her foil, Folly, we then hear from the Apostle Paul who is telling the Ephesians, “Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.” He is telling us that there is a choice. There is a choice to live as the wise or the unwise. And if you choose to live as the wise, don’t squander opportunities to do good because if you don’t, the vacuum will be filled with evil. But how do you be wise? “*do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is*”. Follow the commandments of God, understand that which he has told you to do. Believe in him, love and worship God, love your neighbour. Abandon your worldly goods, follow Christ, take up your cross. Do these sound familiar? I’m just listing off some of what Jesus tells his disciples in the Gospels. St. Paul says, “Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit”. Don’t fill yourself up with that which clouds your judgement, takes away your self-control, and doesn’t leave room for God. Instead, fill yourself with the Spirit of God which grows self-control and will empower you to sing praises to God and give thanks to him “at all times and for everything.” St. Paul is telling the Ephesians that to choose wisdom is to open themselves up to the influence of the Spirit, to allow God to fill them. This is wisdom, and it fits with what Proverbs tells us Wisdom is: for “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9.10). If we submit ourselves to the will of God, and to other Christians who are doing the same, God can fill us with his Holy Spirit of Wisdom.

Our Gospel lesson presents us with the parable of the Wedding Feast. The king called out to those who were invited, and none of them came. Some even killed the messengers. The king responded with wrath. The king then sent out his servants again to call on anybody who would listen to come to the feast until the hall was filled with guests. The king came in to find one guest without a wedding garment, the king then had him thrown out into the “outer darkness”. “For many are called but few are chosen.” So what is this all about?

There is some consensus that this parable might contain an element of prophecy. That those who were first invited were the Jewish people, and that the wrathful reaction might correspond to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. The second group who came in to fill the hall are Gentiles, who answered the call of the Gospel, but that not all of them accepted Christ. To understand the wedding garment requires a bit of context. There is some scriptural evidence of hosts giving their guests clothes to wear as they enter a big event. Think if the church had a policy that everyone entering the nave had to wear a white robe. You could not enter without one of these robes, but we have enough on a coat rack on the entryway that everyone who came in was issued one to put on. You had to put it on to go inside, but it was freely offered to you. Somebody, then, who entered without a robe was refusing the hospitality of the host, because there was no good reason they should be without a robe. That is the same as the King in this story. He provided the wedding garments, he had plenty for all to wear, yet he was disrespected by somebody choosing not to wear one. The king was angry and kicked him out of the feast.

With this context, it is helpful then to see how the Kingdom of Heaven might be portrayed here. God gives his children all the tools we could need to love him and follow him, but to use the tools to His Glory is our choice, just as it was the guest’s choice to put on the robe. God calls all humans to be his subjects, but not all accept him into their hearts. Not everybody chooses to fill themselves with God’s wisdom. This, in short, is foolishness to those who can see what’s happening. Those who refuse to put on the robe, those who refuse to accept God’s gifts, fill themselves with that which is not God, and therefore risk being cast out into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom”, Proverbs tells us. Not that we are supposed to be scared of God. No, not at all. But this Holy Fear means that we should submit to his will because we know he loves us so much that he will not hold back from cutting us loose if we abandon him. This Holy Fear should encourage us to dine at the supper of the Lamb, where those who dine are filled with the spirit of wisdom, with the knowledge and love of God, and where we cannot help to make a melody in our hearts. When we willingly take on this garment and feast at the Lord’s table, we fill ourselves with the fruits of the Spirit, and become filled with the wisdom of God rather than the wisdom of the world.

The wisdom of God is not the wisdom of wizards, or sages, or other characters we bump into along the side of the road as we make our journies. No, the wisdom of God is all-encompassing. It is love-giving, and it is life-bringing. We must love our God willingly, pray that he fills us with this wisdom, with his Spirit. So we must be careful how we live, we must be careful that we take advantage of the opportunity to do good, because the understanding of love is what God gives us to share with the world around us. Especially when the world is filled with the works of the evil one. If we are not careful to put on the armour of God, we will lose the battle of spiritual warfare and succumb to the evil of the world. We must shine forth the light of Christ in all that we do, we must consume the spirit of wisdom – but to do this we must first be ready to dine at God’s table. We must first be willing to accept that God calls, prepares, and raises up gifts for us to use in his wisdom. We must acknowledge the call that God places on our lives, so that we may be ready to be chosen.

We recall the words of the 1st Epistle of St. John that has been the refrain of these past twenty weeks: “God is love, and he that abideth in love abideth in God and God in him” (1 St. John 4.16). Abide in love and you will abide in God, and God will live in you. Take on the robe, mantle yourself in love, and you will be vested with wisdom beyond the world’s comprehension.

And now unto God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, be ascribed all might, majesty, dominion, power, honour, and glory as is most justly due. Henceforth and forevermore. Amen.