

**“THE GOOD BOOK – 3: WISE WORDS”**  
*Ecclesiastes 1:1-18*

At the moment on Sunday mornings, we are looking at the way in which the Bible is put together. This mini-library of sixty-six books contains all sorts of writing that we are used to dipping into a few lines at a time, but we rarely, if ever, step back to look at the overall picture. When we do, we see that this collection of writings – which we believe is inspired by God – is made up of a variety of different kinds of literature. We are probably most familiar with the story of the life of Jesus as it is recorded in the four gospels, but there are also letters, stories, poems, laws, visions, prophecies, biographies and historical accounts.

As with any other library, we need to be aware that we treat different kinds of writing in different ways. We don't read poetry in the same literal way that we read history, for example. We recognise that letters have a particularly personal feel which laws don't. We acknowledge that people who write about visions sometimes have difficulty describing exactly what they have seen in a way that biographers don't. So we're taking the opportunity to look at various kinds of writing in the Bible and asking ourselves how we should read them and what their message is for us today. This morning we're going to take a look at what are called the “Wisdom” books.

There are three books of wisdom writing in the Bible – all in the Old Testament. They are what we might call books of philosophy, written in an style which is almost poetic. (Some of the Psalms might properly fall into this category, but we will deal with them all together under the heading of poetry. And some people also include the *Song of Songs*, but I believe that that is also a poem and we'll look at that along with the poetry books.) One is the story of a man's struggle with the issues surrounding humanity's relationship with God and, in particular, the problem of suffering. That's the book of *Job*. The book takes the form of an extended series of conversations between Job (who despite living a good life, has lost everything) and his three dogmatic “comforters” – and, at the end, between Job and God.

The second book is that of *Proverbs*. This book consists of thirty one chapters of proverbs and aphorisms about life. It's thought to have been compiled by King Solomon and is full of advice on all kinds of subjects from parenting to philanthropy, from resisting seduction to not being too cheerful in the morning. Many of the proverbs contained in it have passed into our own language as proverbial sayings. But, as with any other reading of the books of the Bible, it is vitally important to acknowledge the setting in which they are written and not to rip them out of their context. If we do take them out of context, they can appear to be little more than trite slogans which don't really convey the whole truth. But it is the nature of proverbs to simplify – even to reduce – the truth. It helps us to remember them, but to remember them in the light of the greater truths which are taught in the rest of the Bible.

And the third book, on which we will concentrate this morning, is the book of *Ecclesiastes*. In Hebrew it's called *Qoheleth* or *The Book of the Quester*. Again, it is traditionally thought to have been written by King Solomon, but there isn't a great deal of hard evidence for that. The book takes a fairly cynical look at life and for most of its twelve chapters puts forward the kind of view that any disenchanted thinker might hold about life – it's basically meaningless. That's the clear message of the opening chapter, which we've just read. Only in the last few lines does it become clear that there is an alternative attitude to life, which takes God into account. That's why it's important that we don't just read a few lines and assume that's the last word on the subject: we need to read the whole book – as we would, I hope, read any other book.

The point of the wisdom writing in the Bible is to show that true wisdom is not found in the amount of knowledge we have, nor even in the way we apply that knowledge. True wisdom is to do with acknowledging the influence of God and seeing that he is really behind everything else. Wisdom, for the biblical writers, is living as God leads. Those who refuse to acknowledge God are “fools”. It's a particularly appropriate message in today's world, a world which has been described as “The Information

Society”. Everywhere we look there is information. Facts and figures, opinions and views, news and current affairs, policies and pronouncements are at our fingertips. At the touch of a button, the turn of a page, the click of a mouse, the zap of a remote control we can find out what we want about more or less anything we want.

For all of us there is a plethora of information and ideas that floods into our lives each day. Regular news bulletins and updates on radio and television – indeed, whole TV channels and radio stations devoted to news and current affairs. New ideas and new developments are quickly transmitted. Part of the reason for our paranoia about crime and about potential accidents is not because there are necessarily more of them today (in fact, in many areas there are not), but because we hear about more of them more quickly than we did twenty or thirty years ago. And that all means greater choice, greater ranges of ideas and solutions on offer.

We start to worry that we’ve missed out on something. We need to know things more quickly, more instantaneously than we ever did before. It’s interesting that the very first chapter in Sarah Dunant and Roy Porter’s book about our worries at the turn of the millennium, entitled *The Age of Anxiety*, is about information technology. If you have e-mail, you feel the need to check it far more frequently than the old-fashioned mail box. We are being suffocated under the weight of our mobile ‘phones which intrude into every area of our lives – just so that we don’t miss anything. Instant communication is the order of the day – and woe betide anyone who isn’t quite up to speed (literally and metaphorically) on what’s going on.

We increasingly feel the need to be well-informed about every aspect of life, to know what’s going on. The rise of so-called “consumer programmes” on the television and radio pander to that desire. And the spin-off products are books and magazines by the truckload. Just have a look along the magazine shelves in the supermarket or in W H Smith and you’ll see there’s a publication for practically everything you could possibly want – and that’s just the tip of the iceberg. No High Street in the land lacks a book shop of some kind – and the huge stores such as *Waterstones* or *Ottakar* are always busy. Whatever the pundits say, this is definitely not a non-literate or post-literate society. And the Church has, of course, followed the trend, so that Christian bookshops carry titles on everything from Christian bird-watching to the Apocalypse.

Why? Why are there so many publications, so many sources of information, so many factual television programmes, so many ways to get information? Because we want to find out more, because we are anxious to know what other people think, to know the views of others, particularly the “experts”. The trouble is, there’s plenty of information, but few conclusions. At least, there are few conclusions which are not soon overturned. One week it’s good to eat cabbage by the barrow load because it stimulates your digestive system: the next week you need to keep off cabbage altogether because it causes a greater tendency to cancer in laboratory rats. Schools, hospitals, police forces are judged by their performance according to tables of raw statistics. Even the spiritual pulse of the nation is judged by numbers of people in church on Sunday. Pundits vie with one another to explain the advantages or disadvantages of the “Make Poverty History” campaign. How do you know which is right? There’s plenty of information, but no wisdom. Plenty of experts pushing their views through the media, but no-one to judge which is right (if any). Plenty of books, but no conclusions.

So, getting on for three thousand years ago, this short book of observations and aphorisms written by The Quester was gathered up with the other books of the Old Testament and is now part of the wisdom books of our Bible. From his observation of the world around him, he comes to the apparently cynical conclusion that everything is just a waste of time anyway. At the beginning and the end of his book he proclaims: “*Meaningless! Meaningless! Everything is meaningless!*” It all sounds a bit adolescent, really, doesn’t it? The kind of stuff you wrote in poems in the 6<sup>th</sup> form.

But no. Adolescence is the time to make the most of life, he says in the last chapter. The first part of *Ecclesiastes 12* is all about the effect which the passing of the years has on the human mind and body.

And if you look back through the rest of the book some time, you'll see just how pessimistic the Teacher appears to be. Just looking at the headings in the NIV, we read that "*Wisdom ... Pleasures ... Toil ... Advancement ... Riches are meaningless.*" There's not a great deal of hope here, it seems. You wonder quite why it's been included in the Bible at all – especially if you're of the "let's reduce everything to a couple of happy slogans" school of Christianity.

But the final few sentences of the book, which are effectively the Quester's conclusion, give us some hope. And even though it appears that he has reduced everything to a slogan, they're not happy, easy slogans. The Teacher acknowledges that there is an awful lot of stuff about that we could draw on – "*Of making many books there is no end and much study wearies the body.*" But he also warns against accepting things too naively – "*Be warned of anything in addition to them.*" The "*them*" there refers to what he has said in the previous verse, *v11*. He is talking of the "*the words of the wise*".

As we've already said, when the biblical writers talk about the "*wise*" they mean those who know and obey God. It doesn't mean the experts or the learned or the pundits, but those who have put their trust in God. And the Teacher emphasises that here by stressing that the words of the wise are "*given by one Shepherd*", the reference there clearly being to God himself. The words that are truly wise, then, he says, are the words that come from God. All kinds of things have been written, but just be careful that you're not taken in by them all, because the only things you need to know are the things that God has said. And that all boils down to one thing, really. Let me just read you Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of these last few sentences, from *v9* to *v14*. This is from *The Message*.

*"Besides being wise himself, the Quester also taught others knowledge. He weighed, examined and arranged many proverbs. The Quester did his best to find the right words and write the plain truth.*

*The words of the wise prod us to live well.*

*They're like nails hammered home, holding life together.*

*They are given by God, the one Shepherd.*

*But regarding anything beyond this, dear friends, go easy. There's no end to the publishing of books, and constant study wears you out, so you're no good for anything else. The last and final word is this:*

*Fear God.*

*Do what he tells you.*

*And that's it. Eventually God will bring everything that we do out into the open and judge it according to its hidden intent, whether it's good or evil."*

The conclusion, the final nub of the matter is this, "*Fear God and keep his commandments.*" Behind all the information, under the message of all the books, in the background of all the films and television programmes, lurking in the depths of every search engine and website, is this. Everything you will ever know, all that you will ever experience boils down to these two short phrases. And they're not slogans because they don't simplify and reduce, they merely clarify and emphasise. "*Fear God and keep his commandments.*". Six words that will take an eternity to understand and a lifetime to fulfil. All the wisdom in the world can be summed up in that, and without that none of the information can ever make any sense.

## 1. **FEAR GOD**

Like "*wisdom*", this word has a meaning which is a bit different in the Bible from the meaning it has in our modern speech. *Fear* is not to do with terror or being afraid or constantly having to look over your shoulder to see if God's looking. This is to do with respect and awe, with reverence and honour. Our God, the God of the Teacher, the God of the Bible, is (as we often sing) a great big God. He is above and beyond anything and everything we could ever imagine. We use all kinds of words to try and communicate something of that, words that are rarely, if ever, used of anything or anyone else – *omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient, ineffable*. He is, as the Teacher remarks at the beginning of chapter

12, the Creator. His word brought into being the world in which we live, the universe we inhabit, the totality of everything that we can see or ever will see.

We can never even begin to describe God, to imagine him, to do justice to the immensity of his being. So we are warned here in these words, "*Fear God*", to avoid trying to reduce him to descriptions and images. We should be very wary of limiting him to watertight theologies and systems of thought which say far more about us than about him. God cannot be contained in handy slogans or wheeled in to give easy answers. Once we start buttoning him up we are domesticating him, in the sense of making him what we want him to be. We get him into a neat box and put a label on it, and think we've got him where we want him. We remove the mystery and the wonder from our consideration of God. His word becomes just another set of information. This is a verse from a hymn the rest of which I've lost:

*Cry, "Freedom!" in the church when  
Honest doubts are met with fear;  
When vacuum-packed theology  
Makes questions disappear;  
When journeys end before they start  
And mystery is clear!  
Cry "Freedom!"  
Cry "Freedom!" in God's name!*

Everyone has tried it and the history of the Church is littered with –isms whose members' lists are full of those who have found to their cost that God isn't a Calvinist or an Arminian or a Nestorian or an Arian or a Cessationist or a Pre-Millennialist. And if you don't know what any of those mean, you are certainly not alone and you needn't worry in the least about it!

Fear God, stand in awe of him. Enjoy the splendid creation that has sprung from his divine imagination. Cower at the threat of his judgment on those who despise him. Revel in the magnificence of his provision. Marvel at the huge sweep of his wisdom. Nestle in the warmth of his love. And that last is important, because God is above all else a God of love. He does not want those who come before him to tremble, if they are prepared to accept that love, prepared to receive his grace. Indeed, it is because of his great love that we have the second part of this little couplet. Not only are we to "*Fear God*", but we are also to ...

## **2. KEEP HIS COMMANDMENTS**

As we've already said, the Teacher reminds us in these verses that God is our "*Creator*". He has made us and this vast, intricate, beautiful, terrifying universe of which we are a part. He directs and guides the activity of this amazing creation in ways that are beyond our understanding. If you want to read a poetic description of it, in what I reckon is probably some of the finest poetry ever written, in another of the books of wisdom, look at the book of *Job*, chapters 38 – 41. Just listen to a taster of it from 38:1ff. (I love this, so sorry that I return to it so often!)

OK, so if God has made all that and he loves us, his creatures, then surely he knows best how we can make the most of our life in this world. (We seem to be coming back to this idea fairly frequently in our consideration of the Bible – maybe there's a theme becoming apparent here.) If we want to get the best out of life, to enjoy the "*life in all its fullness*" that Jesus claimed to bring in *John 10:10*, then we ought to follow the Maker's Instruction, to live in the way that he suggests. If we do, then we can know real satisfaction and fulfilment now and look forward to the prospect of eternity with God to continue enjoying that abundant life. If we reject it and decide that we know best, that we have the best idea how to enjoy life, then God will say "OK, get on with it. But don't blame me when it goes wrong, and be prepared to go on living the way you want into eternity – without me."

To show us just how serious he was about our getting the best out of life, he sent his Son, Jesus, into this world to demonstrate and to teach his commandments. And ultimately, Jesus died on the cross of

Golgotha so that you and I could really have the opportunity to experience that love. Accepting the sacrifice of Jesus is just one of the commandments, one of the Maker's Instructions. The choice, of course, is yours. But when you're bombarded with information, when you are bewildered by the amount of stuff coming at you from every side, when you despair about the number of books and programmes and papers and magazines and web-sites and everything else, and you start to wonder if you'll ever be able to make sense out of life, remember that you're not the first to feel like that, you're not the only one. The Quester was one of those who despaired in the face of all that he saw, but who was able to distil the essentials down into those two basic factors – stand in awe of God, who made you and this world: and follow his advice of getting the best out of it. Everything else is just chasing after wind.

### **"THE GOOD BOOK – 3: WISE WORDS"** ***Ecclesiastes 1:1-18***

There are three "Wisdom" books in the Bible – all in the Old Testament. In addition, some of the Psalms could be classed as wisdom literature. (Some people also include Song of Songs, but we will deal with that under Poetry.)

**Job** This book deals with the relationship of humanity to God and questions of suffering. Much of the book is in the form of a conversation between Job and his three "comforters" who give voice to widely held views on how God treats his people. The final conversation is between Job and God.

**Proverbs** 31 chapters of proverbs and aphorisms about life. It is important to recognise that the proverbs are intended to be memorable sayings about life, rather than being the whole truth on any subject. They need to be seen in the context of the whole of the Bible.

**Ecclesiastes** Observations by "Qoheleth" (The Quester) about life. Most of the book is taken up with a rather cynical view of life as being meaningless, until the real message is given in the last few verses.

Wisdom literature deals with the thorny problems of life and its meaning. Sometimes what is written is an echo of the world's view and is there as a foil for the real truth of God's word. It is important to read the wisdom books as a whole and not to take bits of them out of context. For the writers of the Bible, the wise person is the one who lives life according to God's ways. Those who ignore God are the real fools. In Ecclesiastes the key to life comes right at the end (12:13) – we are to "Fear God and keep his commandments."

**The fear of God** is all about reverence and awe, the need to retain a sense of mystery and curiosity about God. We should not try to explain everything and so tie God down to our own ways of thinking.

**Keeping his commandments** is a way of recognising that God made us and is therefore best placed to know how we can get the best out of life. Jesus was sent to earth to help us in this and to provide a means to get to know God better.

### **Questions for discussion**

1. Why is it so important to read the words of the wisdom books in context?
2. What does the world regard as wisdom? How might this differ from the wisdom of the Bible?
3. Why do you think most of Ecclesiastes seems so negative?
4. How do you understand the phrase "Fear God"? How do you "fear God" in your daily life?
5. 12:12 warns about adding to God's words and bemoans the number of books to be read. Does that mean we need nothing but the Bible? Why/why not?