

## CHOICE OR CONSEQUENCE

Pentecost 17 Year B

Prov 1:20-33; Ps 19; Jas 3:1-12; Mk 8:27-38

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Decisions, decisions, decisions! Every day we are faced with important decisions—usually many of them. They may seem to be reasonably mundane decisions like: What are we going to have for dinner tonight to what colour shirt will I wear or what television programs will I watch. If we get a little more serious, they might be ethical or moral decisions, political decisions, religious or theological decisions. Decisions about what we should believe, what we should do or how we should act. And there's a constant stream of information about all of these things surrounding us all of the time—about family life, ethical concerns, political questions, life in general, and so on.

We have to decide how to respond to circumstances and issues on a constant basis. Sometimes we have to make these decisions quickly. And because the information we receive about all these kinds of things is frequently contradictory or confusing, we can sometimes find it difficult to know what to decide or what to do or say or act in any given situation. Real honest to goodness “wisdom”, it would seem, is scarce. You only have to look around you at society in general to see that that's true. There are so many people, it seems, who make bad decisions all the time.

The passage that we're looking at this morning from the book of Proverbs has a lot to tell us about how we make decisions in life. This passage could have been written in our own lifetime. We could easily have read it in a number of books and magazines, found online or in your favourite bookstore—usually in the self-help section.

In our passage today, we find Wisdom crying out in the street. She raises her voice in the town squares, she calls out at the busiest corners. She looks for those who heed her voice and follow her ways but she finds none. Calamity and disaster prevail—fear and terror—death and injury and hurt. It could be written about Iraq or Afghanistan—Israel or Lebanon—or our own parliament—sometimes our own families.

Like us, the Israelite people faced an uncertain future. They too lived in a time of war and upheaval. They were in fear of invasion, famine, calamity and destruction. The future looked bleak. And they were right to be worried.

The author of Proverbs—whether it be Solomon himself or some other sage—makes a connection between the circumstances that they faced, with the state of their spiritual life. Maybe we could draw the same conclusions about our own society—that the more

society moves away from faith in God, the more it heads down the road to hedonism and self-delusion—resulting in all kinds of negative consequences.

Wisdom says that they're facing disaster because they have not followed the way of God. They have forgotten who God is. Now, when they're in a crisis they call upon God but they're so far from the habit of faith—so distant from their own spirits and spiritual needs and desires that they cannot even identify them. They have acted foolishly for so long and are so out of practice in the art of wisdom that now when they desperately need wisdom they cannot find it—not in themselves nor anywhere else.

Garry Friesen, in his book, *Decision Making and the Will of God*, states that there is a direct link between the decisions we make and our relationship with God. The closer we are to God, he says, the better decisions we will make. And that's pretty much the point that Wisdom is making in this passage.

Proverbs 1:20-33 personifies wisdom as a woman who is crying out to the people to pay attention to wisdom and make good choices. She doesn't promise that wisdom is going to make life perfect, but paving the road with wise choices help to make it much smoother when hard times do come. I think we all know that to be true.

She is proclaiming loudly because the people have not heard when God has called. They seem to have gone deaf to his voice. We find this very same issue throughout the writings of the Old Testament prophets, where the same message had been preached with God himself as the speaker, through the voice of the prophet. Here however, it's the woman, Wisdom, who uses these words. People would have been aware of this complaint of God against the people and they would have been startled into paying attention because she was claiming equal authority with God. And it's an astonishing claim she makes.

The irony, is that so few people *do* listen to her voice. We know those who heed Wisdom are few in number because she addresses her audience as "simple ones," "scoffers," and "fools," and describes them as loving and delighting in such behaviour while hating knowledge. They have refused to hear her call and have not heeded her outstretched hand. They have ignored all her counsel, and, indeed, would have none of her discipline. How could it be otherwise? Wisdom is, after all, on the busiest corner where everyone can hear. Everyone *can*, but not everyone *will*.

The two issues that she's most concerned about is their relationship with God and their need to listen to her. She doesn't begin with works first, but outlines here what will be

the required behaviour in the context of a proper relationship with God, and herself as the spokesperson of wisdom.

When the writer of Proverbs writes that Wisdom is crying in the streets, he's saying that God is present in the world. Wisdom is right here in front of us and we need listen to it so that we can make right choices about how we are to live. We need it to be able to commit ourselves to God *and* to be able to enact appropriate behaviour.

Wisdom is quite literally part of God—an aspect of God's being. The best way to think of it is like a candle. When you light a candle you get both heat and light emanating from it. We can see the candle and feel the candle. Well, God's like that. God is present with us in the world in many ways. Wisdom is one of them. Wisdom is an emanation of God—an aspect of God's being that we can experience in our lives, in the world, here and now.

Wisdom is the ability to make choices, based on free will. It's not a freedom from influences but a freedom to make right responses and create appropriate outcomes. Wisdom means that we have the power to influence our lives and the lives of those around us. And in order to achieve proper responses we need to identify those things that block out wisdom.

In the reading from Mark's account of the gospel, that we heard this morning, Jesus states, *"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."* (Mk. 8:34-25)

Earlier in Proverbs, chapter 1 we are told that, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge/wisdom." It may seem like a paradox but as Christians, taking up the cross is, for us, the beginning of wisdom—the wisdom that frees us from apathy and self-service. This passage helps us understand the paradox of taking up a cross that gives life, and the paradox that losing your life saves it. It's a wisdom that comes from connecting to those things that are worthy of us and letting go of our attachment to transient things—things that don't last—unimportant things. This passage reaffirms how leaving behind the familiar and safe territories can lead us to wisdom.

They remind us, also, that the road to wisdom involves a cost.

We so easily get attached to things that are perishing—things that are temporary. We have certain ways of thinking and doing things that we get attached to them—and forget that they are often transient and imperfect. Even in our worship and church life, we

sometimes get so attached to doing things a certain way, we find it hard to look at things in a fresh or new and dynamic way.

For Christians—for us—Jesus Christ is the voice of Wisdom—himself an emanation of God, present in the world. Jesus is the voice who cries in the wilderness and in the city—a voice that continually calls us back into to relationship with himself and with God. Jesus is the voice of wisdom that brings peace and comfort and ease and security and well-being and abundance and freedom from dread—all these things that we need in our lives and in our world.

Jesus Christ was sent to announce that the kingdom of God is right here, now—a reality in human experience. Jesus remained true to the end, he took risks, which put him into danger that lead to the cross.

This kind of wisdom—the wisdom of Christ and the cross—asks whether or not those things we have committed our energy to, are worthy of us. Is this where we ought to commit our energy? This is the discipline of letting go of those things that possess us. To take up the cross is to find our well being through service to the world. It is to become those who work, without fear, to renew our world.

This is the wisdom of taking up the cross. We are reassured that we can be confident that when we leave our homes and each other to go to work and school every day—whenever we embark on another day of uncertainty—wisdom accompanies us—holy wisdom, Godly wisdom. No matter what life brings, God is continually present with us. God has promised that those who seek wisdom and listen for her voice will be free from insecurity, unease and dread. That is a great gift: it is the gift of faith—and it is here, for each one of us.

Remember, though, that wisdom begins, not in action, but in the priority of due reverence and worship of God, through Jesus Christ. I doubt that there would be many today who would want to make the claims that Wisdom does in this passage. Perhaps the closest parallel is written in John's gospel in which Jesus Christ is the Word and we are called to hear the Word. The consequence of hearing and living out the knowledge of Jesus Christ is the security and peace that comes from living life as Christ did on earth—and by embracing his wisdom—the wisdom of the cross.

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.