

Ninth Sunday after Trinity 2015 (Evensong)

Job 28

Chapter 28 of Job is delightful, isn't it? In the particular edition of the RSV I use at home it simply describes it, at the top of the page - it's not part of the text: just an editorial heading – at the top of the page it says “The poem on wisdom.” Actually, to tell you the truth, I don't recall coming across it before. I think I must have done, because I know I've read Job through, as a book, and I can't have read the whole of Job without having read chapter 28; but it's certainly come to me completely fresh for this sermon. So I suppose it's a rediscovery.

Wisdom literature – of which the Book of Job is an example – is generally becoming rediscovered. It used to be neglected but now is becoming increasingly the subject of scholarly attention. And I think it's more than a question of fashion. It might even be about something as portentous as entering a new

philosophical era; about being in transition between modernism and post-modernism. Wisdom literature doesn't have much to say in the modern, or modernist, era.

St.Paul does. His propositional arguments are congenial to the rational mind. They are logical. They stack up. And that's why in the modern era, in some areas of Protestantism, which is in many ways the religious response to rationalism, there's been almost an idolatry of St.Paul. I remember when I was a university chaplain my free church colleague who was a conservative Baptist - conservative even by Baptist standards – I remember him once saying to me that he always asked himself what would St.Paul do; not what would Jesus do, but what would St.Paul do. I think I just nodded sagely at him because the alternatives would have been either to laugh in his face or to say to him “What on earth does it matter what St.Paul would do?”

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And, of course, it was hopeless to have any sort of argument with him because he always won hands down; because he always had an answer for everything: he had a brain the size of a double decker bus (which helped); he had it all sorted out; and it all stacked up . . . so long as you accepted logic and rationalism as the premise on which the intellectual edifice was predicated. Perhaps I'm flattering myself, but I always liked to hope that it wasn't so much that I was intellectually inferior, as that I had a different way of thinking.

There is a different way of thinking about; different to the way we have thought over the course of the last 300 or 400 years; a way of thinking that admits the possibility of there being more to life than technological endeavour and scientific achievement; a way of thinking that sits light to a degree of chaos because it's alright for there to be things that can't be organised or measured. And just as with modernism - with this desire to measure and understand and to be

in intellectual control of everything – God got increasingly squeezed out, so with the break down in modernism a space is increasingly being created which God can inhabit – but not God as expressed in the in fact remarkably rational propositions of Protestantism as we've known it.

And so we are living through the horror of seeing the strident, vicious, violent death throes of rational religion, expressed as much in fundamentalist Christianity as in fundamentalist Islam.

It's into this melting pot – which is either frightening or exciting depending on your point of view – that a text like Job 28 speaks in a way in which it couldn't be heard even a generation ago. It speaks of traditional technology; of harnessing creation to produce commodities that create wealth. In the times of Job the commodity was jewellery; in the last 300 years the commodity has been fuel of one sort or another. The difference is a matter of detail. The principle is the

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same. And Job 28 asks what the big deal about it is. What's the big about technology creating wealth? People are asking that today. The people of Greece are asking it. The constituency parties of the Labour Party nominating Jeremy Corbyn to be their leader are asking that.

Only I'm not convinced that either Oliver Tsipras being the Prime Minister of Greece or Jeremy Corbyn being the Prime Minister of Great Britain provide an answer. Job 28 provides an answer. And the answer to what is the big deal about technology-creating-wealth is not replacing technology-creating-wealth with a naïve alternative. The answer is complementing technology-creating-wealth with something that keeps technology-creating-wealth under control. That is wisdom. Job 28 calls it the fear of the Lord.

"The fear of the Lord" isn't a particularly helpful phrase. I've been looking through different

translations of the Bible to try to find Job chapter 28, verse 28 expressed differently, but they all talk about the fear of the Lord. The problem is that it has too many connotations of being frightened of God. Too many of us are frightened of God too much of the time. It's a tyranny from which we need to be liberated.

If we talk about having an appreciation of the Lord, it's a bit weak and vacuous, unless we manage to think of it as an appreciation with real teeth. Perhaps being on awe of the Lord is the most helpful way of thinking about it.

How that works, of course, cannot be measured; but neither can the wealth that it yields. We apply ourselves to it relying on the grace of God to give us that peace which is, indeed, beyond all understanding.

Amen.