

## Proverbs 1

### Two voices

If you have visited Jenny and me at home, you might have noticed a picture we have on one of our walls: a group of people in front of our previous church, taken in the summer before we moved back to Cornwall.

#### Overhead: Oakwood Chapel

In that picture, there's a couple who lived quite close to the chapel, across the road in the adjacent estate. I've got a picture of that, too. Thank you, Google Maps!

#### Overhead: Ram Gorse

As with many of the estates in Harlow, it's what we used to call "Corporation Housing". Harlow probably still is called a "New Town", though it's obviously a lot *less* new nowadays. There was a village - now referred to as "Old Harlow" - adjacent to which a whole new town with a population now reaching 80,000 was built, starting shortly after the end of the Second World War, with so many Londoners needing rehousing after that Blitz and all that. Harlow Corporation, I think it was, oversaw those various building projects.

And although you might call it "cheap and cheerful", the houses were fine to live in - though you can see from the pictures here that they had no idea just how car ownership would frantically increase in subsequent decades. And just as the roads through the estates could be a bit narrow, the houses themselves could be a bit small.

So our couple from across the road decided that they would like to have a conservatory built on the front. I think you can just about make it out in the picture - most of the houses have had that little extension built on now. So proper building plans for the extension had to be put together. And Alf was talking about those plans one day. As you'd expect, they had to start by digging down, to lay some

#### Overhead: foundations

for the conservatory. Nothing wrong with that. But building regulations have changed over the years. The foundations for the lightweight single-storey conservatory were actually deeper and more substantial than the foundations for the two-storey house it was fronting!

For all that the "Corporation Housing" in Harlow was unspectacular, I haven't heard that they have typically been falling down. So it does make you wonder whether the current building regs have maybe gone over the top.

But you can't deny that foundations are important. You very likely remember that little parable Jesus told about two builders who used two totally opposite building techniques.

***"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock."***

(Matthew 7:24-25)

***"And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it."***

(Matthew 7:26-27)

And that is a theme that runs through the whole of the Bible, if you look for it. There are - to borrow the name of that useful little evangelistic book

### **Overhead: two ways to live**

You could call it - thinking now in terms of that first chapter of Proverbs that we read earlier - the way of wisdom, and the way of folly. Which is the more secure way to walk? It exactly parallels the question, which foundation shall I build on?

For the next few weeks - our typical spot, in this untypical year, for the school summer holidays - we're taking time off from Matthew's Gospel and doing something else. For a change, I thought, let's go back into the OT, and have a look at what gets called "wisdom literature". That's those books right in the middle of our OT's:

### **Overhead: Job - Ecclesiastes**

Proverbs is in some ways a tricky book - in fact, it almost seems like *two* books. The first third of the book, roughly, and a couple of snippets at the end, are chapter-long arguments concerning the need for wisdom. The remainder of the book, well over half of it, is what looks very much like a random assortment of short one-liners, we'd probably call them, though most of them are technically *two*-liners. A bit like one of those old-fashioned

### **Overhead: sweet jars**

and you just can never tell, just because you have pulled out a strawberry-flavoured one, whether the next will be orange or aniseed or sherbet.

So we will dip into both parts of the book, over these next few weeks. Today and next week, longer passages, chapters 1 and 3. For the four weeks after that, individual verses from chapter 10. So that we get something of the feel of *both* ways of looking at this call to true wisdom, the only one really sensible way to live.

Chapter 1 falls apart quite nicely into three sections. As it's the start of the book, we've got a declaration of the author's intent. *Why have I written this book?* You get that answered right at the outset.

And then you have two speakers called forward. It is something like a debate. These two opposing viewpoints on life are each allowed to present their own cases. One is labelled as clearly deficient, obviously wrong - and the author steps in with a

### **Overhead: health warning**

to point out its deadly errors. The other side - wisdom personified - like one of those survey questions you might sometimes have answered: If NatWest Bank were a person, do you imagine them being ... a) bossy, b) complacent, c) friendly ... etc. So if Wisdom, capital W, were a person, what would she say to us? That's what we find out as this first chapter closes.

The agenda of the author  
The seductions of the sinners  
The words of Wisdom

- **The agenda of the author (1-7)**

So we start off with the author introducing himself. It's Solomon.

***The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel:***

(Proverbs 1:1)

And I'm sure there will be some clever scholars who would dispute this, but it does at least fit with that other "wisdom literature" book I mentioned earlier, Ecclesiastes. And whereas I'm not quite so convinced that Solomon wrote that, it certainly does contain some stuff that fits with Solomon as a collator of wise sayings:

***Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care.***

(Ecclesiastes 12:9)

And you've got this record of Solomon in Kings, too:

***For he was wiser than all other men, wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Calcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol, and his fame was in all the surrounding nations. He also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005.***

(1 Kings 4:31-32)

But probably even more important than *who* wrote this book we call Proverbs is the *why* of its being written. Here's the up-front intentionality:

***To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity; to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth —***

(Proverbs 1:2-4)

Now I have to admit that much of what I say this morning is either going to be self-evident to you, or it's not, based simply on where you stand already. If you are wise, you will consider wisdom desirable. But if not, it is precisely as Solomon says here:

***... fools despise wisdom and instruction.***

(Proverbs 1:7)

It could be that how I say things today is boring. I try my best to not just

**Overhead: drone on**

and send you all to sleep because of a dry, monotonous presentation. But I admit that I may lack the skill to make this stuff as exciting to you as it deserves to be. Could be. I'm happy - or *relatively* happy, at least - for you tell me that *I* bore you.

**Overhead: communication problem**

My style of speaking just doesn't click with your style of listening. Quite possibly. But what I would be much more concerned about is if you think that not *I*, but *the things I'm talking about* are boring. If what Solomon lays out here in these opening verses doesn't grab you, then verse 7 here ...

***... fools despise wisdom and instruction.***

(Proverbs 1:7)

... becomes self-diagnostic. If you disrespect this stuff - and not how I package and present it - it shows something highly concerning about the way your soul is tuned. Your value system is skewed - and it is skewed away from the values that *God himself* has. Because this opening battery of words is meant, right at the start, to make us say,

**Overhead: I want this!**

So what does Solomon's introduction say to us about wisdom, in its various forms? It is ... desirable, developable, needful and beautiful.

And yet it is not the most fundamental thing that Solomon wants to speak to us about. Wisdom is not an end to itself. You might say that wisdom is foundational for life. But there is an even deeper foundation that this must rest upon. It's not just about our relationship to the world around us, but if and how we relate to the God who made this world.

So, quickly, those introductory points. You could think of this first group as like the start of a

**Overhead: firework display**

You hear the first *thunk*, and then a succession of fiery incandescences spread across the sky, each one individually sparkling fiery rose or luminous magenta or whatever, but the idea is to get the *whole* of your field vision engaged in wonder.

**Wisdom is desirable**

Just look at the succession of *big* words that we're given here, those words that resonate with rightness. These are the things that we just instinctively long for in our individual lives, and to see in our society.

***To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity; to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth —***

(Proverbs 1:2-4)

It could be that you think it all sounds very worthy ... but it doesn't sound like a whole lot of fun. "Prudence", for example ... as boasted of, you might remember, by Gordon Brown when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer ... but he didn't exactly radiate charisma, did he? Remember that awful

**Overhead: smile**

that lost him the General Election? But folks, we do need to remember that life is *not* primarily about having a barrel of laughs, and living on an

**Overhead: adrenaline high**

of continuous excitement. That's something that can never be maintained and bettered, year on year. Whereas ...

***But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day.***

(Proverbs 4:18)

And there is an ultimate wisdom, too which we should also consider:

***... the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.***

(2 Timothy 3:15)

So wisdom is *desirable*. And

**Wisdom is developable**

***... to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth — Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance, ...***

(Proverbs 1:4-5)

Isn't this really rather encouraging? This *isn't* just a lecture to the youngsters, telling them yet again to *Grow Up*. I know that older folks typically think that youngsters think they know it all already. I love that

**Overhead: Mark Twain quote**

*"When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years."*

But the fact of the matter is that middle-aged people, and older people, just as much, can continue growing in wisdom. *Must* continue to, rather. This is something open and necessary for *all* ages.

***Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance, ...***

(Proverbs 1:5)

And surely there can't be anything more galling for a youngster to be told off for thinking they know it all *by an older person who also thinks THEY know it all*.

And there is an open-endedness to that NT prayer, too, about continuing to grow *throughout* life:

***... grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.***

(2 Peter 3:18)

So wisdom is developable, and ...

**Wisdom is needful**

***... to understand a proverb and a saying, the words of the wise and their riddles.***

(Proverbs 1:6)

I rather like that word "riddles" there. Is Solomon talking about *deliberately* confusing words, someone playing verbal tricks with you? Or just that some things *are* hard to get your head around?

They say that we are living in a

## Overhead: sound-bite society

There was something along those lines in the news this week. I think I saw headlines saying that Boris Johnson thinks we'll be all back to normal by Christmas. But read a bit more closely, and the impact of that headline has to be softened: he qualified that hopeful statement by referring to that very big *if*: *if* there is no "second wave" of Coronavirus.

Folks, we want it simple. We want life, generally, to be simple. If things don't go according to our plan or how we think things ought to be, we ask *Why?! ...* and expect there to be an answer simple enough for us to understand.

Remember that song from

## Overhead: *Fiddler on the Roof*

*Would it spoil some vast eternal plan?  
If I were a wealthy man.*

*Why can't I have it my way?* that's asking. Sometimes I think we just have to settle for the answer that life is complex. Life is messy. There are, as Solomon says, "riddles" which we will pick away at but possibly never fully understand. We need wisdom to unpick some of those riddles. And for those we can't, we need faith in a great and gracious God, to whom we can say,

***But I trust in you, O LORD; I say, "You are my God." My times are in your hand; rescue me from the hand of my enemies and from my persecutors!***

(Psalms 31:14-15)

Finally, in this first big section,

## Wisdom is beautiful

***Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and forsake not your mother's teaching, for they are a graceful garland for your head and pendants for your neck.***

(Proverbs 1:8-9)

Just in passing, I could also add that wisdom doesn't just need to be learned, but *taught*. Father and mothers need to learn how not to nag, but nurture, to encourage hearing rather than hardness. So I think that's saying that wisdom needs to be modelled, really: you have to teach wisdom in a way that is itself wise.

But just look at the image that Solomon uses here. It isn't a question of wisdom simply being practical or useful or helpful. It is something likened to an ornament, which is there for beauty alone. Folks, being wise is not just a necessity for life; it is part of what makes human life strangely glorious, despite the Fall - for it reflects something intrinsic to God himself. He is

***... to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.***

(Romans 16:27)

And yet, before we move on quickly to Solomon's chairing of the debate, remember also that wisdom *alone* can't be real wisdom. You aren't *really* wise if you try to remove the foundation that underlies wisdom itself, that "only wise God".

You can't be a real

### **Overhead: Manchester United**

fan simply by wearing the T-shirt for its glorious red colour. You're a fan if you are absorbed by the team behind the brand, and cheer when they score, and groan when they miss ... and fret over whether they're going to make it into Europe next year.

And you are not really wise unless you explicitly base your wisdom upon the "only wise God":

***The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.***

(Proverbs 1:7)

Technical point: if you want to argue that "knowledge" isn't the same as "wisdom" - and I agree with you there - well, we read on in Proverbs:

***The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.***

(Proverbs 9:10)

It's both. But here are some people who seem to disagree. What do you make of *their* arguments? Aren't they somewhat enticing?

- **The seductions of the sinners (10-19)**

Solomon starts, like before they start transmitting certain TV shows, with a content warning. Not "this programme contains scenes which viewers may find distressing", but ...

***My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent.***

(Proverbs 1:10)

Right from the start, *this stuff is wrong. DON'T get taken in!* I'm only quoting it here so that you can see through the kind of tactics that will be used to get you on board. It will appeal to *something* within us ... just not a very *good* something.

***If they say, "Come with us, let us lie in wait for blood; let us ambush the innocent without reason; like Sheol let us swallow them alive, and whole, like those who go down to the pit; ...***

(Proverbs 1:11-12)

Well, that doesn't sit very comfortably, unless you're already a bit of a committed thug. But this is only the means. The *end*, well, if it's made appealing enough, *might* be thought to justify the means.

***"... we shall find all precious goods, we shall fill our houses with plunder; ..."***

(Proverbs 1:13)

Now you can analyse this in terms of the Ten Commandments, and see that this is simply theft ... and also covetousness. But of course most temptations that hit us *don't* label things in terms of what's wrong. They major on the desirables. Remember Eve falling for the lie of the Serpent?



***So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, ...***

(Genesis 3:6)

And the local gang in our city streets today *does* have *something* going for it, that will appeal to some:

***"... throw in your lot among us; we will all have one purse"***

(Proverbs 1:14)

Folks, that is the devil's counterfeit of Christian fellowship: you will feel that you *belong*. In a lonely world, *belonging* is desperately attractive. Even if your theft doesn't include GBH, isn't there that buzz of having pulled off something underhand *together*? Even if your home is furnished by good honest labour ... doesn't it feel so good to think that you *belong* - because you have reached the standard that all the adverts say our homes must conform to?

Folks, isn't it so important to practice seeing through the half-truths of advertisers, as well as the outright lies? Solomon is giving us a lesson here, as he goes on to shred that argument of how wonderful it will be as part of a community of thieves. First, the obvious: it's just plain *wrong*:

***... my son, do not walk in the way with them; hold back your foot from their paths, for their feet run to evil, and they make haste to shed blood.***

(Proverbs 1:15-16)

And then, this is just so *stupid*:

***For in vain is a net spread in the sight of any bird, but these men lie in wait for their own blood; they set an ambush for their own lives.***

(Proverbs 1:17-18)

If you do this kind of stuff, you're dumber than a bird. They can recognise that you're setting a net, and avoid it. But you don't realise that you're pointing the gun, spiritually speaking, at *yourself*.

***Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.***

(1 Peter 2:11)

We just need to get real on this. *Spiritual* lives matter. And it is *real* wisdom *not* to be taken in ... particularly by stuff that should be pretty obvious and self-evident:

***Such are the ways of everyone who is greedy for unjust gain; it takes away the life of its possessors.***

(Proverbs 1:19)

You only *think* (or perhaps *feel*) that you have gained, that you have arrived, that you have achieved. But you are celebrating the most ghastly of own-goals.

So instead of the seductive words of folly, let's finish this morning by listening to

- **The words of Wisdom (20-33)**



***Wisdom cries aloud in the street, in the markets she raises her voice; at the head of the noisy streets she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:***  
(Proverbs 1:20-21)

Notice that wisdom can speak publicly. Not like those plans of the gang of thieves, whispered in a dark corner of some seedy pub. No, wisdom does not have to hide or be implicitly ashamed of itself. That's how the Gospel is meant to be shared, too:

***But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.***  
(2 Corinthians 4:2)

So look, here is an open and sincere offer, with no strings attached.

***"How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge? If you turn at my reproof, behold, I will pour out my spirit to you; I will make my words known to you."***  
(Proverbs 1:22-23)

Isn't that wonderful, too? It is just like the call of the Gospel, free and for all:

***And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.***  
(Revelation 22:17)

But there is a warning, too. Ignore at your peril. Before long, if you *insist* on folly, you will come a cropper! And those wise words you thought you were oh so clever to ignore will come back to haunt you!

***"Because I have called and you refused to listen, have stretched out my hand and no one has heeded, because you have ignored all my counsel and would have none of my reproof, ..."***  
(Proverbs 1:24-25)

***"I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when terror strikes you, when terror strikes you like a storm and your calamity comes like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you."***  
(Proverbs 1:26-27)

And there can be ... will be ... a "too late":

***"Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently but will not find me."***  
(Proverbs 1:28)

And the consequences of folly will ensue. For

***Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.***  
(Galatians 6:7)

***"Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the LORD, would have none of my counsel and despised all my reproof, therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way, and have their fill of their own devices."***

(Proverbs 1:29-31)

And here are those Two Ways so neatly summarised, right at the end of the chapter:

***"For the simple are killed by their turning away, and the complacency of fools destroys them; but whoever listens to me will dwell secure and will be at ease, without dread of disaster."***

(Proverbs 1:32-33)

But looks, folks, I don't want you to just go away today with a lesson in common-sense morality. It's great to think, when we come to this book, of "Wisdom" in some personified sense, but it's all left very theoretical if we do that. It's just a literary convention. It's just people trying to be wise, and putting words into the mouth of this personification ... like a

### **Overhead: puppet show**

Solomon's words are worth hearing, yes. They're worth taking to heart, that too. But Solomon's wise words alone have no power to change us or to save us. They're

### **Overhead: signposts**

only. If we *are* wise, we will follow those wise words. But what can cure our folly and make us *desire* to become wise? We don't need just signposts; we need a Saviour, to change us inwardly.

And in Jesus Christ we have both. The commentaries will pick up on Solomon's personified "Wisdom", and debate just how much of this we could perhaps see as Jesus speaking. You can have a wonderful theological argument along those lines with Jehovah's Witnesses, particularly focussing on chapter 8. But big deal! I don't want to leave you with theology, but something to warm your hearts and help you on your path of following Jesus through this next week.

So I'm not leaving you with Wisdom alone, with or without a capital letter. I just want to point you to Jesus. And drop a question on you, which we might be able to think through a bit tonight: what should it mean to us that we do not just obey a principle, that maybe sometimes boring need to be staid and prudent? ... but instead we follow and worship a Person who is worth getting excited about, and whose voice speaks not just wisdom, but peace deep down to our souls?

***... you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ...***

(1 Corinthians 1:30)

*Yes, all I need, in Him to find  
O lamb of God, I come*