

ON THE GETTING OF WISDOM¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, 18 August 2024

In 1910, Ethel Richardson,² who wrote under the name, Henry Handel Richardson, published her second novel, *The Getting of Wisdom*.³ Its heroine, Laura, a child from a relatively poor family in rural Victoria, is sent, aged 12 years, to a boarding school in Melbourne. There she finds herself amongst more sophisticated girls from wealthy urban families. Richardson had herself, at the same age, been sent to Melbourne's Presbyterian Ladies' College and based her novel on those experiences. Effectively bullied and having "grown used to being what you would call an unpopular girl", Laura discovered how the world worked. In other words, she "got" wisdom.

Having become more religious than her fellows, she finally discovered that God did not do for her everything that she asked for.

It was her own absurd mistake: she had taken the promises made through His Son, for gospel truth; had thought He really meant what He said, about rewarding those who were faithful to Him. Her companions—the companions on whom, from the heights of her piety, she had looked pityingly down—were wiser than she. They did not abase themselves before Him, and vow a lifelong devotion; but neither did they make any but the most approved demands on Him.

The end of the novel sees her running away from the school, from its apparent sophistication and from her rural innocence, into a wiser freedom. Hers is a recognisable experience, one that we will know. All of us will have found ourselves in a strange place and needing to understand what is going on. We will need to "get wise" and "learn the ways of the world". But is this really wisdom?

Our reading from 1 Kings involves a similar getting of wisdom, this time by King Solomon. The similarity is that both wisdom experiences involve a practical capacity to manage the world in which one is placed. Laura the schoolgirl must navigate her path, while Solomon must navigate his as a king. Laura's journey was more personal, while Solomon's involved the use of power over others.

The Lord appears to Solomon in a dream, asking what Solomon wants. Solomon's request is to have an 'understanding mind' and to "discern between good and evil". We have heard that latter phrase before, in the creation narrative. The serpent tempts the woman by saying that the forbidden fruit will enable them to know "good and evil".⁴ Solomon appears here to be asking for that which the man and woman got only by an apparent disobedience. In each case, the knowledge of good and evil came with responsibilities. The man and woman, like Laura, lost their original innocence and found themselves having to navigate a less than Eden-like world. Solomon's risk was the disruption of his kingdom.

In the section following today's reading we come across the exemplar of Solomon's wisdom, his encounter with two prostitutes, one of whose sons has died in the night by being overlain

¹ Readings: 1 Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14; Psalm 111; Ephesians 5:11-21; John 6:51-58

² [Henry Handel Richardson - Wikipedia](#)

³ [The Getting of Wisdom - Wikipedia](#)

⁴ Genesis 3:5

by his mother. Both women claim the surviving child. Proposing to cut the child in half and divide it between them, he demonstrates a knowledge of human psychology and solves the problem without adding to the conflict.⁵

Wisdom is an essential feature of the Hebrew scriptures. The books of Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon are generally grouped under the heading of “Wisdom Literature”.

In particular, the Book Proverbs is based around a “two-way” approach to life that contrasts folly with wisdom, the “way of life with the way of death”⁶ Proverbs begins with such a thought, which appears also in this morning’s psalm:

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction.⁷

It goes on to describe a young man approached on the street by an attractive prostitute who seeks to divert his path into her ways. Various commentators have named her “Dame Folly”,⁸ who is to be contrasted with “Lady Wisdom”. If we revert to the link between Solomon and the creation story, we could say that the man awoke from sleep to find himself with a woman, while Solomon awoke from his dream to find himself with Lady Wisdom. This kind of personification makes wisdom a powerful influence in life.

One of the dangers of wisdom is hubris, or pride, which is why the “fear of the Lord” is frequently described as the “beginning of wisdom”; not fear in the sense of terror, but fear in the sense of awe, a true understanding of one’s ultimate dependence. Hubris is a way to describe the action of the man and the woman in the creation story. It is reflected in Solomon’s dream when he is admonished to observe God’s law. That is, no matter how wise he is, how accurately he divides good and evil, he does not define what they are. Solomon’s downfall comes when, later in life, his foreign wives turn him away from that path and towards other gods.⁹

The distinction between wisdom and folly appears in our reading from Ephesians, where Paul says:

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.¹⁰

Here wisdom is not just a gift that one has or has not; it is something to be worked at. We must “look carefully” and be intentional as we go about our daily lives. And the standard is the same as we met with Solomon, “the will of the Lord”. Paul is reminding us that we too can be wise.

That wisdom is not just a product of knowledge is emphasised by Paul’s reference to music as an enhancer of our life, a means by which God resides within us.

⁵ Peter J Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible, Grand Rapids, Brazos, 2012, pp. 36-47

⁶ Jeremiah 21:8

⁷ Proverbs 1:7

⁸ Daniel J Trier, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible, Grand Rapids, Brazos, 2011, pp. 99-125

⁹ 1 Kings 11

¹⁰ Ephesians 5:15-17

In his commentary on today's gospel, Andrew McGowan recognises that our natural reaction to Jesus talking about being the true bread, eating his flesh and drinking his blood, is to link it to the Eucharist. Without denying that link, he suggests an additional relationship that corresponds with our theme this morning. He notes that, in the prophets and the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible, eating a teacher's body is a reference to absorbing their teaching. It is rather like our English phrase to "lap up a person's words" as a reference to absorbing them. He says that Jesus offers himself as holy wisdom. To eat him is to absorb what he offers.

McGowan then links this idea with the concept of the "Word" in the prologue to St John's gospel. The Greek λόγος can be translated as reason or wisdom. He concludes:

While Jesus offers himself as wisdom to eat, this is not the wisdom the world knows, and certainly not simply knowledge in the usual sense. Already in the OT cases mentioned, wisdom offers not just edification but transformation. ... Flesh and blood point to Jesus' life and death as the centre of understanding, believing, abiding. This is not Jesus offering himself as a metaphor, but as a living person who gives his life for others. To eat and drink at wisdom's table is to receive the difficult and precious gift of understanding who he really is, and hence who we really are too. ¹¹

So, what do we make of all this about wisdom? What does it mean for us? It might be best to talk about what it doesn't mean. Wisdom is not yet another burden that religion imposes on us. As if it's not enough that we should repent of our sins, live a godly, righteous and sober life; we must now be wise. Wisdom is not a duty; it is a gift.

Neither does it mean that we cannot make mistakes. Wisdom is not the same as perfection. Mistakes are not only inevitable, they are acceptable. Wisdom does not mean acting for the best every time. It is rather about how we approach our decisions than about the decisions themselves.

If we impose a demand for wisdom on ourselves, we are making the error that it is principally an individual question; something about me. Today's epistle urges us as a community to be wise. When I look out at this congregation, from youngest to oldest, those in front of me and those behind me, I am in awe of the collective wisdom of this community, its accumulated experience, its diverse imagining and its varied skills. Combined, we support each other; together, we can be wise, not foolish.

Solomon's wisdom failed when he departed from the foundations of his community and sought other gods. Likewise, Paul exhorts us to give thanks to God together. Ultimately, we will be wise when we know who we really follow and, thus, who we really are.

[When I first wrote this sermon, I had intended to end with the following poem. When I preached it, and arrived at this point, I realised that I had come to the end and needed go no further. I have kept the poem for the online version.]

A poem by George Herbert:

Submission

But that thou art my wisdom, Lord,
And both mine eyes are thine,

¹¹ [The Sign of the Loaves \(IV\): Eating the Flesh of Jesus \(substack.com\)](#)

My mind would be extremely stirred
For missing my design.

Were it not better to bestow
Some place and power on me?
Then should thy praises with me grow,
And share in my degree.

But when I thus dispute and grieve,
I do resume my sight,
And pilfiring what I once did give,
Disseise thee of thy right.

How know I, if thou shouldst me raise,
That I should then raise thee?
Perhaps great places and thy praise
Do not so well agree.

Wherefore unto my gift I stand;
I will no more advise:
Only do thou lend me a hand,
Since thou hast both mine eyes.¹²

¹² [Poem: Submission by George Herbert \(poetrynook.com\)](http://poetrynook.com)



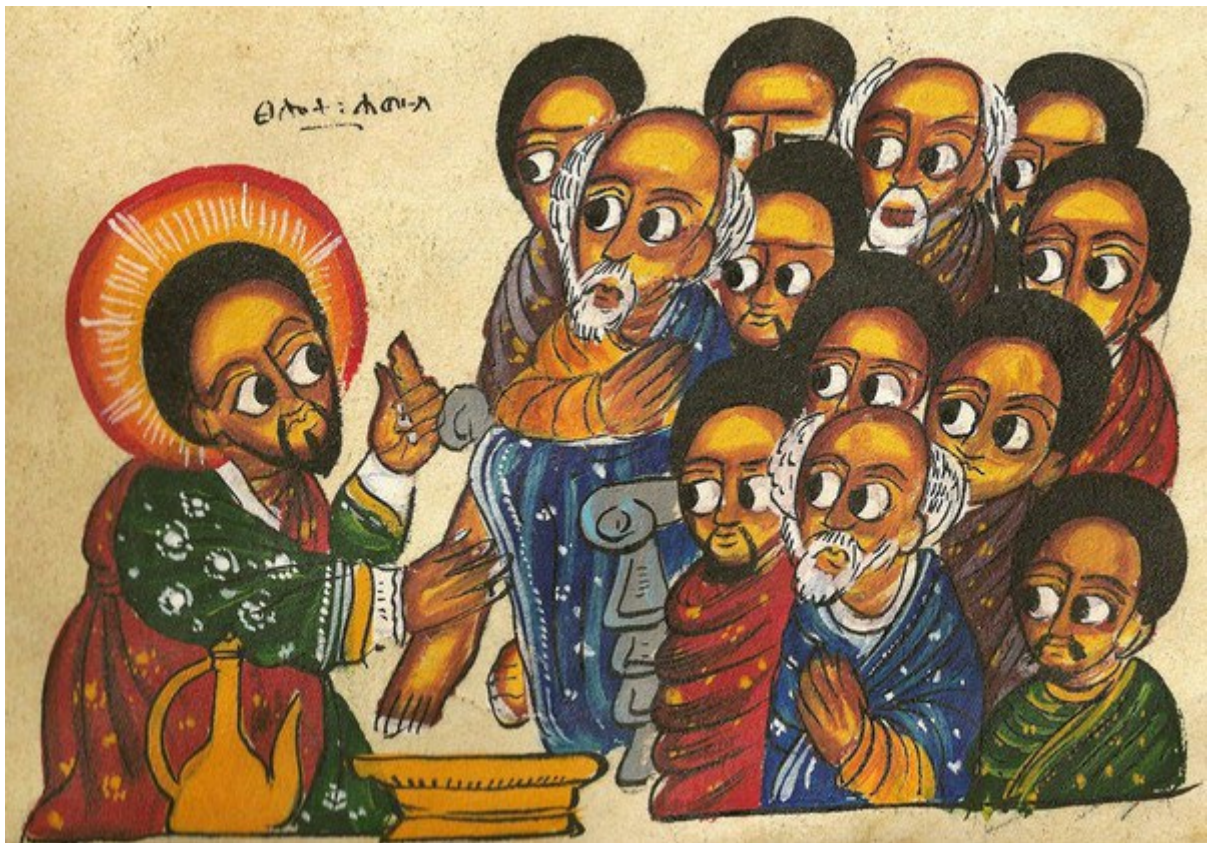
Henry Handel Richardson (Ethel Florence Lindesay Robertson (née Richardson))
National Portrait Gallery, London



The Judgement of Solomon (1640)
Matthias Stom (1660-1652)
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston



Singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs



I am the bread that comes down from heaven