

Proverbs 8

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 02 March 2014

Preacher: Paul Levy

[0 : 00] So in the reference of the sermon I came across a painter called Paul Gauguin, a French artist, and one of his paintings is entitled this.

! Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going? Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going? Paul Gauguin tries to explore those kinds of questions of origin, where do we come from, and identity, what are we?

And destiny, where are we going? In pictorial form it's a scene from Tahiti, where he ended up. And it's his way through art, using his genius to try to make sense of life and its origins and its meaning, its identity and purpose and destiny.

To ask the question, which he is doing in that painting, is does anything hold this life together? And different people come at that in different ways, don't they, in our culture.

Is there any meaning? Does anything hold it all together? So some scientists come at it, don't they, from their own angle. Physics, and the great quest for a grand unified theory of everything.

[1 : 16] The God particle that pops up in newspapers and all that. And what really excites people, which is interesting, is that they want a grand unified theory of everything, but one which rules God out.

Now people try to do the same, I just knew, with discoveries about biological evolution in the 19th century, in the same way. That instead of putting science in its place, they said no, it's a total explanation.

Not just for biological, physical processes, but for the whole meaning of life, for philosophy. And psychological, psychologically, there's an answer.

Well the effect of that is very much. Let me read you a letter written by Joseph Conrad, the novelist he wrote in 1897. And he's speaking about the effect of this.

Therefore, let us say a machine, speaking about man, or about life in general. A machine, it evolves itself out of a chaos of scraps of iron, and behold, it knits.

[2 : 23] I am horrified at the horrible work, and stand appalled. I feel it ought to embroider, but the machine goes on knitting. The infamous thing has made itself, made itself without thought, without conscience, without foresight, without eyes, without heart.

It is a tragic accident, and it has happened. You can't interfere with it. It knits us in, and it knits us out. It has knitted time, space, pain, death, corruption, despair, and all the illusions.

And nothing matters. And that is where some grand unified theories lead you. It just doesn't matter. That's where they get you.

If you leave God out, and perversely, people want to do that, don't they? So you might think, well, I'm not scientists at all. But on a personal level, we do that. So my values, what I do, I do.

What are the limits I'm going to set in my life? What are the ways that I'm going to explore who I am in relation to other people? And so in our culture, there are massive suspicions, aren't there, of a kind of overarching morality.

[3 : 35] A theory of morality. So people will say, if you've got an overall life view, an overall view of morality, that is oppressive. The idea that there is some great universal truth, apart from our culture's truth, freedom, and tolerance, that is seen as an oppressive thing.

To have a life view where there is an overarching morality, that is seen as oppressive. And the big thing for your friends and my is individual choice. So you can decide your own values.

But I want to say to you tonight, that leads you to a real mess. And it's leading us as a culture to a real mess. So it's fine as far as it goes, you can decide what you want and me decide what I want.

Apart from when you find somebody who does something and you feel they shouldn't do it. But they define their value. They define that it was okay for female genital mutilation.

That was the norm for them. And they think that it should be applied to all young girls. It's okay because it's their value. Our value is that it shouldn't.

[4 : 44] And we want to say to those African tribes who still practice female genital mutilation, that they shouldn't. And yet we find ourselves not really knowing why.

Or we find ourselves wanting to say to Western intelligence, torture is wrong. But why is it wrong? Or to say to the British National Party, racism is wrong. And we feel it so strongly, don't we?

It's a moral value. So you've seen it this week, haven't you? With this whole furore about the paedophilia association in the 1970s. And our media really going to tone on it.

And they feel it so, so strongly. It is wrong, don't they? But actually, try and ask them why. I want to say to you, if you haven't got a grand unified theory with God in it, it is very, very hard to make a case for universal human rights.

What is it? Is it the strength of our feelings? Is that it? Is it the strength of our feelings that make it okay for you and I to impose our morality on other people? And to tell the world this is what your value should be?

[5 : 51] Is it strength of feeling a specific thing? Well, it's very hard to prove. And the implications create the issue, don't they? So the issue, how do I know what is right and what is wrong? How do you know that?

We might feel really strongly about it. Your friends might feel really strongly about it. But can you justify it? Now this great chapter in Proverbs, which I found quite hard work this week, has something very, very important to say to us.

About overall meaning. And overall structure in our lives. In life, God has this grand, unifying theory, not just for physics and for science, but for everything else.

He's Lord of all. Lord of the physical world and the human world. And God's answer is a one word answer for a unifying theory.

And it is the word wisdom. God has this grand, unifying theory, his wisdom. That there is an order to life. And I think, as I've looked at this chapter this week, I've been surprised again at the bigness of Christianity.

[7 : 02] Just how vast a thing the Lordship of the Lord Jesus Christ is. And if we live by this wisdom, if you live by it and you walk with God, you will flourish. But if you don't, you will wither.

And that flourishing is an eternal flourishing and that withering is an eternal withering. Now the passage shows us four things about the wisdom of God that is actually the wisdom of Christ.

And God shows us in this passage God's great unifying theory of everything is the wisdom of Jesus. So, four things.

First of all, verses 1 to 11. Four things, which really are eight things, but it won't be long-circuit. We see wisdom is something that is unified and public. Unified and public. Look at verses 1 to 4.

Does what wisdom call? Does what understanding raise her voice? On the heights beside the way, at the crossroads, she takes a stand. Beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals, she cries aloud, To you, O men, I call, and my cry is to the children of man.

[8 : 03] Wisdom is pictured as a woman. It's a personification. That might seem odd to you, but we've seen it before. And we, Uncle Sam, the Americans have him. He doesn't really exist, but he is the embodiment of the kind of American political establishment.

In this country, on the back of a 50-pence coin, we have Britannia. She's a mythical figure who kind of sums up in a mythical form something British and all Britishness.

And the author of Proverbs does that. This mythical figure of a woman to communicate to you and I, to show us something in a very imaginative way. And the first thing we have to say about the creation of this woman, this single embodiment of wisdom, is that it shows us there is a unity to all things because she embodies all wisdom.

She embodies the grand order of things in the mind of God as a complex, wonderfully varied, all-inclusive unity, both in the physical world and the human world.

There are deep patterns which converge in one place, the mind of God. it's a bit like a web.

[9 : 19] So you have a web that spreads out in many directions. But it's not like a spider's web. A spider's web is flat, isn't it? It's not kind of multi-dimensions. But imagine a web that goes in many, many, multiple dimensions all over the place.

But it's got one center and the center is not a spider. The center is a mind. And it is the mind of Christ. It is unified but it is also universal. Do you see that?

She calls out to everyone. Look at verse 4. To you, oh man, oh men, to all mankind. And there's a picture of this woman driving along and you're at the traffic lights.

He didn't seem to be getting rid of all their traffic lights. He's on many roundabouts everywhere. But you're at the traffic lights and there she is there calling out, calling there. Go to Parliament Square, she's there.

And she's everywhere where people are moving on our presence. She stands by in Broadway Church Station. At the crossroads. Everywhere where people are moving on our presence.

[10:22] She's there introducing herself, announcing herself. Both whispering and clamoring. You might say, what is it? Well the author would say verse 9, we miss out. We miss out if we don't notice.

Verse 9, they are all straight to him who understands and right to those who find knowledge. But if you're not ready to take that knowledge, if you're not ready to receive it, if you're prejudiced against it, you will always find a way of filtering out that wisdom.

One of the ways we filter out God's wisdom is that we've got this prejudice, I spoke about it earlier, we've got a prejudice against the universal truth. We assume that it can't be there.

So we don't go looking for it. And we don't see it and we find all our prejudices confirmed. But actually in so many ways in life, just in the way that it unfolds and in multiple other ways, we hear God announcing himself and God addressing us.

And God addresses us with words that are true and worth hearing. So look at verse 7, she speaks what is true. Look at verse 8, all the words of our mouth are righteous and just.

[11:34] Verse 10 and 11, there's a sense of value to them. Silver, gold, and how much more significant are wisdom's words than any material possessions that you've got.

You see, this is imaginative, isn't it? You want to picture it. God himself telling us that he is good and he is true and he is wise and that he can be trusted. He can be trusted.

It reminds you, doesn't it, of the Lord Jesus. The Lord Jesus who is God's wisdom. So towards the end of his life, he says, I am the way and the truth and the life.

Earlier on, he says, you will know the truth and the truth will set you free because it is a unified truth with a universal call to everyone to come and find freedom in the truth and the wisdom of God.

And it isn't a power grab. Like so many people think it is. It isn't a power grab that somehow we're restricting human freedom. It's the way of ensuring and enshrining that humans flourish.

[12:41] And we see that in the next two verses. So we've seen that wisdom is unified and it's public. But in 12 to 20 we see that it protects and it enriches. So in this section of 12 to 20 you see the kind of natural world.

In the human side of life 12 to 20 and then the next section which we'll look at in a little bit you see the physical world, the natural world. So let's see wisdom protecting and enriching.

And from verses 10 to 20 it is far from being a power grab by some kind of small curmudgeonly fundamentalist minority who want to coerce and force people to prevent them from flourishing.

It's quite the opposite. There is in human life and humanity a wisdom from God that protects and enriches us if we only respond to it. So look at verse 12.

I, wisdom, dwell with prudence and I find knowledge and discretion. Somebody says it's like wisdom with their three sisters. Verse 12, prudence, knowledge and discretion.

[13:47] To fear the Lord is to hate evil. Verse 13, the fear of the Lord is a hatred of evil. Pride and arrogance and the way of evil and perspired speech.

I hate it. That's precisely the things people are concerned about. Don't you hate being manipulated? Don't you hate being handled? If that's not being sold something, string doctrine, false claims, manipulative claims in advertising, dodgy dossiers and all the rest of it, wisdom hates such things.

On the contrary, look at verse 14, I have counsel and sound wisdom. I have insight, I have strength. By me kings reign and rulers declare what is just. By me princes rule and nobles all who govern justly.

Now those are shocking verses, aren't they? Because what that's telling us is this, you and I see God's wisdom in some unexpected places if only we realised it. So just look again in verses 15 and 16 and the claim of the passage is this, you see the wisdom of God where there's good government.

You see the wisdom of God where there are societies which flourish. The talk of rulers and kings and nobles and princes is a bit old-fashioned. Let me try and translate it into a modern idiom.

[15:13] God's wisdom is there in different kind of public institutions and bodies. God's wisdom is there in governments whether local or national. God's wisdom is in civil service.

God's wisdom is in quangos. Those bodies related to government but not part of it I can never work out what they are. God's wisdom is seen in international bodies like the UN like the World Bank. God's wisdom is seen in the police. God's wisdom is seen in our armed forces. God's wisdom is seen in our education. God's wisdom is seen in the NHS. God's wisdom is seen in the highway agency.

God's wisdom is seen in transport. God's wisdom is seen in commerce and in business in Hewlett-Packard. When these things are good and doing good in a good way it is because they are following the pattern of God's order for wisdom.

And let me be honest with you I often don't recognize that. Maybe you're not a Christian here tonight and you're a skeptic and you think what on earth we do not need God for all of that.

[16:30] We really don't. We just invented it all for ourselves. And if we are Christians tonight we might have a healthy suspicion of anything that isn't totally Christian.

Is there anything that isn't totally Christian? Could there be any good in it sometimes? And I want to say to you I and you are mistaken about that because God's wisdom is part of his common grace.

And many institutions exhibit God's common grace without necessarily being Christian at all.

In any overt way wisdom is that the wonderful thing about this wisdom is it doesn't just protect us it enriches those who follow. So he goes on to say in verse 17 I love those who love me and those who seek me diligently find me riches and honour are with me enduring wealth and righteousness my fruit is better than gold even fine gold and my yield than choice silver.

Wisdom enriches society and not simply materially. But in society when individuals who follow wisdom the result tends to be stability and a kind of social flourishing that otherwise doesn't happen.

Generally some sort of prosperity because that in the end is the way that the world has been made to work. By contrast one writer has written the fruits of corruption in so many countries where there is lawlessness and laziness and exploitation and dependence it is very evident that those societies don't flourish.

[18:05] Even when material things are fewer than they might be wisdom brings a better sort of riches into the lives of those who listen to her. So people nevertheless you might not have much money at all and yet nevertheless you flourish because you follow the pattern of wisdom that God has established.

And it's true because that is where all true value lies. listening to the wisdom of Jesus Christ and living by it. Somebody else has written, the great sellout of western civilization over the past 100 years is that it has sold God cheap and bought materialism dear.

It's forgotten the value of knowing God and the ultimate emptiness of everything without God. You might say how can you make these bold claims about wisdom in human life?

Well part of the reason that we can do it is because this is God's word. And there is a unity and wisdom and not just simply in human institutions and societies but in our origins.

Wisdom planned the whole thing from the beginning. So look at verses 21 to 30 and there's a change from the human world to the physical world.

[19:28] From civilization if we can pull it like that. Back to creation and once more wisdom is right on the heart of that. And you see something else from this web from this mind of Christ kind of stretching out in different directions.

This pattern of everything with Jesus at the center. And it takes us from the street corners and the parliament squares back to time before time. the moment before physics itself.

So we've seen that wisdom is unified in public. Wisdom protects and enriches. But also we see wonderfully that wisdom is the architect and appreciator of all being.

The architect and appreciator. Look at verse 22. The Lord possessed me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old, ages ago I was set up.

At the first, before the beginning of the earth, when there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water, before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills I was brought forth, before he had made the earth with its field or the first of the dust of the world, when he established the heavens I was there, when he drew a circle on the face of the deep, when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep, when he

assigned to the sea its limit so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations, of the earth, there I was beside him.

[20 : 55] It's a poetic section, isn't it? It's a lot of complicated kind of interpretation issues that I'm not going to go into. But I want you to see that wisdom is seen here, emanating, coming from God himself.

Perhaps we should see it as the expression of his mind, as it focused on the creation, that his mind brought creation into being. His great blueprint for everything, God's grand theory of everything. And verses 23 to 26, do you see that, stress that wisdom was before everything, it was prior, it was the blueprint that becomes the reality.

And you could say from verse 27 onwards about wisdom, that it is watching creation. But that gives the impression that he's a kind of spectator, doesn't it? But you come to verse 13, you've got this remarkable verse.

Then I was beside him like a master craftsman, like a master workman. So there was the architect, an active agent, and the mouth of God bringing worlds into being, and setting this wonderful universe in motion.

[22 : 10] It's so, so different, isn't it, from pagan myths? It's so, so different from modern accounts of being. Isn't it?

So personal. He thought it up, and breathed it out, and when he saw it, he said, boy, is that good. The architect of all being, this creator with extraordinary power and infinite skill.

And he looks at this world with breath, taking beauty and mind boggling complexity. And God has left his fingerprints all over creation. The imprint of wisdom is everywhere.

There's another thing I'd like you to see. I didn't complete verse 30. And this is where, this is where it begins to hit home. Okay? So wisdom is unified and public.

Wisdom is protecting and enriching. Wisdom is the architect and appreciator. And then gloriously, wisdom is inviting and life-giving. Look at verse 30. Then I was beside him like a master worker and workman, and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world, and delighting in the children of man.

[23 : 36] Look at the words there. Daily delight, rejoicing always, rejoicing in the world, delighting in the children of man. Wisdom is inviting and life-giving.

There is a grand unifying theory. But it's much more than a theory. It's a pathetic core theory. It's more than a formula. There is a person.

There is a person at the heart of the universe. This wisdom represents the face and the mind behind the universe. And wisdom here represents the expression of God's face as he made everything.

And do you know what I love about this face? What's the best thing about this face? From verses 30 and 31. It's a smiling face. Isn't that just glorious?

That at the heart of the universe is a smiling face. And do you know it's more than smiling, that it is creased with happy laughter. Isn't that what we do when we make something?

[24 : 38] We make cake, not that I've ever made a cake. We make a toy. We manage to mend something by some miraculous power.

We get a computer program to work and you smile. Isn't that just great? And maybe you laugh. You laugh at the wonder of bringing something good into being.

you want people to see it. That's right. That's really right. Don't be ashamed of that. That's right. You want someone to see it. And that is expression on the face of God.

And as we create things and as we smile and delight at the work of our hands we are simply echoing him. And that is what he wants us to do. That is what he wants us to be filled with his delight. To rejoice in his whole world.

John Calvin is very often very unfairly thought of as an oppressive character. It's not at all. Listen to what he says. There is not one little blade of grass.

[25 : 49] There is no colour in this world that is not intended to make man rejoice. Isn't that lovely? There is not one little blade of grass.

There is no colour in this world that is not intended to make man rejoice. Think about that for a moment. The blades of grass as you get up in the morning and that kind of shiny dew that is on them at the moment.

The yellow daffodils just peeping out of the ground. Why were they put there? Every single one of them is put there by God to make men and women and boys and girls rejoice as they go past. Take time to smell the flowers and rejoice. But we'd be wrong to stop there. Because there's something even more remarkable.

The word rejoicing is often used in other parts of the Old Testament in a different sort of way. It's used in the context of laughing. And it's used in the context of playing.

[26 : 53] And somebody a better Hebrew scholar than I am, which wouldn't be difficult, says you can translate the words in verse 30 to 31 as frolicking. So how about this?

Look at verse 30. And I was beside him like a master workman, and I was daily frolicking, frolicking before him always.

Is that too much for you in the presence of the Almighty? One Jewish writer said this shows that God's wisdom is fun.

C.S. Lewis has got a picture of Aslan, doesn't he? The powerful lion, the majestic, regal figure, very stern and serious in many ways. And he shows Aslan romping with the children. They bury their faces in his name and they romp around the grass.

It's like the dad, isn't it? You see the dad and his small child on a sunny day in the park. And they wrestle. And he pulls his child's face into his and they roll along the grass.

[27 : 56] And the child screams for him to stop, not wanting him to stop at all. That is what is happening here. So here we have it. At the heart of the universe is a holy, holy, holy God.

But it is not a dreadful seriousness as some people want it to be. But at the heart of the universe there is a holy God and there is a principle of fun and frolicking and rejoicing and personal flourishing.

Look at verses 31. Rejoicing in this inhabited world and yet delighting, it's a stronger word in the children of man. Wisdom doesn't only rejoice in God's world, she says that she was delighting in mankind.

You are not the result of chance. Don't let anyone ever tell you you are. You are not the result of an impersonal force. You are not a random collection of molecules that happen to be thrown together in some kind of personality miracle that you have meaning.

you have glorious meaning and you have delight in us. I came across this quote this week from French philosopher Pascal who said the more people I meet the more I love my dog.

[29 : 19] Well, God is not like that. God is not like that. God delights in the human race that he has made.

There is a creator who loves this creation. Not, not, be sure of this, not your sins, not our sins. He wants to correct our sins and to redeem us.

But our basic existence, our successes, our potential, he delights in us. And I think as we see wisdom as both the architect and the appreciator, we're taking somewhere that pulls all this together.

The physics, the social morality, the pattern of human flourishing, God's wisdom in common life, the creation of it all. And we put it together with this person, this face that smiles and appreciates and wants to bless.

And we start to have some inkling of what is God's grand theory of everything, what is it? And we have to ask ourselves, what is the result for us?

[30 : 22] If there is a God who has made everything, and if there is an order underlying everything, and he delights in us, and he loves us, and if that means that one way of living is better than another, well the conclusion is this, the conclusion we can't escape is God's wisdom is the true way to live.

And God's wisdom is true to the way things are. It works, God's God's wisdom is God's wisdom is to take your place in the harmony of creation in the way the maker intended, and so that is why he invites you in verses 32 to 35.

And now our sons, listen to me, blessed are those who keep my ways. It's God's world, keep his ways. Hear instruction, be wise, and do not neglect it, blessed is the one who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my door, for whoever finds me finds life and obtains favour from the Lord, but he who fails to find me injures himself, all who hate me love death.

There's an invitation here, isn't there? There's an invitation to you and I to recognise God's wisdom, and to let it make you wise. Wisdom says I sorted out creation for God. Can I come and help you

sort the mess of your life out?

And the way that that wisdom was made through him and without him was not anything made that was made in him was life and the life was the light of man.

[32 : 20] The light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it. Then verse 9. The true light which gives light to everyone who was coming into the world. He was in the world and the world was made through him yet the world did not know him.

He came to his own and his own people did not receive him. But all who did receive him who believed in his name he gave the right to become children of God. Who were born of blood and the word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only son from the father full of grace and truth.

This wisdom of God finds its greatest embodiment in Jesus Christ who came in order that you could meet God and you could become part of his family and you could have your sins forgiven because of Jesus' death and that you could have new life because of Jesus' resurrection and he sat on the course of life.

He sat on the course of life with all its ups and downs. There's no guarantee of prosperity in this world. There isn't, I don't think. Or health, that you'll have good health or any other thing.

But it will lead you to ultimate eternal life with him in heaven. And there is this picture back in Proverbs chapter 8, it's now right at the end, as you see it, of somebody watching and waiting, somebody out of the doorway.

[33 : 45] In verse 34, somebody who stands at the gate and they watch and they wait and they want wisdom to come in and be with them every day. And I wonder if you've ever done that. I wonder if you've found life a favour with God, but also purpose.

You've found eternal life in Jesus and you've found a better way of living by his wisdom. You've found an entry point to that new creation. Jesus said, I am the door.

He is the door to God's wisdom. Let me invite you to open up that door, if you've not already done so. And if you're a Christian, well, will you be that person in verse 34?

Will you wait at his door every day for him to guide you? And enrich you? Because that is God's theory of everything. Let's pray.