

## ACCEPTING WISDOM'S INVITATION

### Pentecost 16 – Cycle B: Proverbs 1:20-33; Psalm 19; Mark 8:27-38

It is a striking image we have in this morning's First Reading. The wisdom of God is personified as a woman prophet who stands at the city's busiest corner and at other times at the city gates crying out "How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?" The simple ones are her target audience, because they do not resist her call; they have the capacity to respond. The scoffers and fools, on the other hand, are beyond hope; and Wisdom's message to the simple ones is, in part, not to slip into being a scoffer or fool who will close the door on a living faith.

Psalm 19 elaborates on the Proverbs passage. In the psalm, the sign of a living faith is keeping God's law. Scoffers and fools reject God's power and real presence in the world, and regard God's law – God's ordinances, the psalmist calls them – as imperfect and, consequently, unworthy of observing. A living faith, Wisdom would say, is the pre-condition for keeping God's law: God is worshipped when we live according to God's ordinances; when we love God by loving our neighbour; when justice and fairness characterize our relationships; when we are generous and gracious, as God is generous and gracious. Faith lives through our actions.

And the calamity Wisdom prophesies in the First Reading is not divine retribution for disregarding God: it is the scoffers and fools "eating the fruit of their way." When love, justice, and generosity are displaced by hate, oppression, and greed, life as we know it becomes a never-ending competition for privilege and power.

I find it interesting that the calamity Wisdom describes and the condition for such calamity described by both Wisdom and the psalmist resemble the world we live in. I sat down this week with some of the leaders of the Christian community in Kitchener-Waterloo to reflect on new directions for the Council of Churches. To a person, we are amazed at the sea-change that has occurred since the Council of Churches started 50 years ago. Most of the changes are positive: there has been growth in lay leadership not only within our churches, but also in the wider community; it used to be that churches were identified by their clergy, not their membership. The sectarianism of Protestants and Catholics and the in-betweens (Anglicans and Lutherans) has evaporated largely through the initiatives of Vatican II whose 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary will be celebrated next month. The Christian community's respect for and understanding of other faiths has grown and has, certainly in Kitchener-Waterloo, contributed to the health and strength of this very multi-cultural and multi-faith community. The gap between Christian evangelicals and mainline Christians is slowly closing as we discover a meeting place in the social gospel.

But we also see our congregations losing ground because the world in which we live, the country in which we live, is a hostile environment for people of faith. Religion, because it is often the handmaid of nationalism or fundamentalist movements, has become a dirty word. Cynicism, not only from beyond the faith community, but also from within the faith community leads people to becoming fools and scoffers, as Wisdom would call them. Spirituality is suspect because it appears to resemble superstition in a society whose values have become much more earthy in the past 30-plus years. Affluence in the so-called Developed World, huge advances in science, physics, math giving birth to unimagined technological advances, easy and instant communication anywhere in the world, fast and easy travel – all of these things move us into a place where our so-called need of God has diminished. When we look deeply into the Bible, I often observe for our confirmation classes that the great religions of the world have held mystery to be the realm of God. As the mystery of life diminishes as a result of human achievement and accomplishment, when so many aspects of our life approach state-of-the-art/top-of-the-line, it is easy to see why religion and its cousins "faith" and "spirituality" are losing their caché. Humanism has eclipsed God, or more precisely, our proclamation of God; and in that eclipse God's simple ones slip almost unnoticed into the ranks of scoffers and fools, as Wisdom defines them.

And so the Council of Churches, free from denominational dogma, becomes a forum for our questions and insights, and perhaps even a sounding board for the larger Christian community. But our involvement for about ten years with other faith communities has given us a perspective on Christianity that we could not have gained otherwise. And it has led us back to the second question Jesus asks his disciples in today's Gospel, "Who do you say that I am?" as a perennial question for the Christian community; as a question to be answered by churches, denominations, and individual Christians. Peter's

answer in today's reading was certainly the correct answer for his time and place. Everything that Jesus was about to do which, ironically, he describes immediately after Peter's confession, can be seen in the context of his mission as God's Anointed. And Peter's answer stands: Jesus is ever-Messiah, ever-Christ. But for those who lack the religious education and theological background to interpret Peter's answer, the Christian community needs to find and use a vocabulary that communicates what we are trying to say.

A beginning point is to think about the personification of Wisdom we encountered in today's First Reading, and then think about Jesus as at least the Wisdom of God, if not the Word of God. I like that, in fact. Jesus as the word God spoke to communicate with simple ones; Jesus as the word God spoke to embody the ordinances of God; Jesus as good news for a world heading for calamity.