

Views from the Pews: Wisdom and understanding

Trinity Sunday gave us two jewels of Jewish poetry, Proverbs 8, and Psalm 8. Both focus on God the Creator. The Proverbs passage has a female Wisdom and Understanding as a close eyewitness to God's handiwork, but apart from that observer, who may or may not be human, humankind is absent.

The Psalmist on the other hand has God as architect again, the heavens being 'the work of your fingers', but humankind is present throughout, beginning with the lips of children as vehicles for praise. And Verse 6 poses a real challenge. Verses 6, 7 and 8 do not seem to fit well with the Proverbs narrative, because, suddenly, humans are 'rulers over all your creatures'. Now, no doubt there are Hebrew scholars who will reassure us that 'rulers' in this context means responsibility as well as power – akin perhaps to the Māori concept of kaitiakitanga – but the Psalm looks to be quite specific in its English translation, and literalists would caution us not to read comfort into the uncomfortable.

This is important because in modern political discourse nature/the environment can too often be framed as an obstacle to that modern-day God – 'Growth'. It is tempting to seek scriptural support for our contempt for the natural world although both passages are explicit in their declaration that the universe is God's creation.

So, on just one Sunday, we have two Old Testament treasures that when compared, offer a verbal minefield. Consider Ps 8 v5 as a prelude to v6. Are we really "crowned with glory and honour" and thus destined to rule over creation? What do these passages say about human destiny? About God's plan for us? About our stewardship of creation? Our need to turn to scripture for comfort must be balanced by an obligation to dig deep, especially when we encounter challenging words. Nothing should be taken at face value. Cultural and theological context is everything, and most of the Bible reflects the world view of the day. The Psalms were the product of a millennium or more, and so must contain evidence of those theological and cultural shifts over time. Likewise the Proverbs is a collection of Jewish wisdom amassed over time. Not for nothing is the character in last week's passage called 'Wisdom'. That is just what we are called to exercise when comparing these two passages.

- Richard Swarbrick