

Sermon for Witney Benefice, 7 February 2021

May I speak in the name of God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

About a week and a half ago, I was in a class at Cuddesdon on Anglican identity, and we were told that Miss Marple is the ideal model for priestly ministry. And it's true: We would all do well to emulate her knack for paying attention. But her greatest attribute is her wisdom. "Everybody in St. Mary Mead knew Miss Marple," Christie writes in *4:50 From Paddington*; "fluffy and dithery in appearance, but inwardly as sharp and as shrewd as they make them."

The great wisdom of fictional detectives is part of the reassurance of detective stories, which we read and watch for pleasure because the world we live in is unfortunately not so tidy. In our day-to-day frustration we can feel like we are stumbling around in the dark, barely able to see the next step. Wisdom personified is not someone we often encounter in real life.

But we do meet her in Proverbs, in our reading from this morning. This wisdom figure is somewhat mysterious. We can look back with our New Testament viewpoint and make connections retrospectively with Christ, who you might remember from Advent is sometimes given the title "Wisdom" when he is called "O Sapientia". But Biblical scholars are uncertain about wisdom's identity: she could be a personification of a divine attribute; or an attribute of the world itself, of meaning implanted by God in creation; or perhaps she has roots in the goddesses of the ancient Near East. It delights me to add that Miss Marple herself says, "One of my names is Nemesis." Ambiguity is common to them both.

Wisdom is at home at God's side, but also at home in the world, saying;

then I was beside him, like a master worker;
and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,

³¹ rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the human race...

And, a few verses earlier, she says:

²³ Ages ago I was set up,
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.

And there are definitely echoes of Christ here, especially in the way that wisdom rejoices in creation. The difference, of course, is that the son of God is described in John's gospel as not being created, but as being not only with God but actually the same person as God, before the beginning of the world. Jesus Christ is not a created being: "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being." Nevertheless, wisdom and Christ share a love for, the created world.

It is curious that we have this passage now, with its deep echoes of Christmas, when we have firmly moved past Candlemas, which is the official end of the Christmas season. But it feels as though this juxtaposition of the light that shines in the darkness, and the delight of wisdom, comes just at the right time, when it is cold and grim, and we have barely a reprieve before we go into Lent. It is lovely to meditate on the delight of Christ in creation, and the delight of wisdom in the world.

Despite the way we spell and say the word "delight", it is not related to the word "light" -- in fact, we didn't add the "gh" until the 16th century, and if we take "delight" and "light" and look at their Latin roots -- and please forgive me for taking too much delight in etymology -- delight comes from dilectus, and light from lux. But I have to say, I can't resist the suggestiveness of how close these two modern English words are. Last week we thought about light for Candlemas, and the way that light helps us to see. And now, in John's gospel, we have light connected to Christ, whose wisdom is the wisdom of God, the wisdom that allows God to know, and see, everything.

What Miss Marple does in her wisdom is not just to see things, but to see things as they truly are; she sees the truth behind the facade, she sees the overarching narrative behind the tiny incident that others might dismiss. And our readings are really about seeing. Wisdom is there at the beginning, watching the world being made; and Christ is there at the beginning seeing as God sees, characterised as light.

The interesting thing about light -- is it a particle or a wave? -- no, the interesting thing about light is that it doesn't erase the darkness — not while the world is full of sin and pain. But the light lessens the darkness, and, in a way, helps us to understand what the darkness is. Think of a time when you have been in a bad situation, and it wasn't until someone spoke a kind word that you realised you were suffering. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." The darkness has not overcome it, but this word in Greek can also be translated as "understood". The darkness has not understood the light. This is a trope we see over and over again in literature — goodness illuminates evil, but evil, more often than not, fails to understand the good, and this is why it is ultimately defeated. "Forgive them, for they know not what they do," says the light on the cross, shining in the darkness on the darkest day.

CS Lewis writes an allegory about light into the third of his Narnia books, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. As the ship moves closer and closer to the Utter East, the end of the world, in search of the Christ-like figure Aslan's country, the light becomes brighter and brighter, almost unbearable.

"Reaching Aslan's country", which is the goal of the crew, especially the very pious mouse Reepicheep, is, of course, a metaphor for death; but it is also a metaphor for seeing utter truth. To grow close to God is to emerge into the great light in which all is revealed. Someone said to me recently that one of the best things you can do as a priest visiting a dying person is to ask them to pray for you. Often they can do very little, but they can still pray, and surely, someone who is close to death is close to God, and closer to that light and truth.

As we move towards the beginning of Lent, I'd like set a challenge: let's not think of it as a dark time. It starts with a smudge of ash, a reminder of our mortality, but it's also a time when we look forward to Holy Week when Jesus is glorified on the cross - an image that to me is full of light -- and to Easter, when he bursts from the tomb -- again, angels clothed in light stand around the place where his body was, when Mary Magdalen goes to seek him in the tomb, and it is a matter of seeing when she fails to recognise him, and then, when he says her name, she sees him for who he truly is. Lent is a time of quiet illumination, in which we can pause, and pray more purposefully, and take time to be with God. It is a time to dwell in the light. I imagine Lent not as a time of dazzling light, but also not a time of darkness. Rather, as a time when we sit in pools of light, in pools of prayer, the way it feels to sit in a room that has grown dark, but you can still read by the light of the lamp that shines over your book.

In the prayer-poem that he wrote in 1962 in praise of Wisdom, Thomas Merton imagined Jesus coming into the darkness to meet us. He writes:

**The shadows fall. The stars appear. The birds begin to sleep.
Night embraces the silent half of the earth.**

**A vagrant, a destitute wanderer with dusty feet, finds his way
down a new road. A homeless God, lost in the night, without
papers, without identification, without even a number, a frail
expendable exile lies down in desolation under the sweet stars of
the world and entrusts Himself to sleep.**

We are in darkness, especially at the moment; but darkness is where the Lord meets us, and the darkness does not understand him. We must do the work to meet him as he comes, bringing light to us in our darkness. He brings wisdom because he is wisdom. He helps us to see, and that doesn't just mean seeing things - for he is "the true light that enlightens everyone". It means, like Miss Marple, seeing things for what they truly are. So let us trust him as we journey on in the half-light of this world, letting him light the few steps ahead of us, dwelling in his wisdom, as we

wait for that day when he will come again, full of grace and truth, and the darkness will finally be gone, and we will be dazzled.

Amen.