23 May 2019: House Communion
Feria of Easter
Proverbs 8: 1, 22-35; John 15:9–11
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‘The Call of Wisdom’

Happy is the one who listens to me,
watching daily at my gates,
waiting beside my doors.

+May I speak in the name of God who is Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Amen.
‘Those clever men at Oxford, know all that’s to be knowed- but none of them know half as much as intelligent Mr Toad.’ So sings the antagonist-cum-protagonist, Toad, in Kenneth Grahame’s *The Wind in the Willows*. It might seem odd - counter intuitive even - to begin a sermon on ‘The Call of Wisdom’ by quoting a figure who is a) a children’s literary character, b) dissing the very university of which we are a part c) a dangerous kleptomaniac, and d) well, a toad. Yet Toad is a helpful starting point to enable us to discern what on earth might be meant by ‘The Call of Wisdom’. Toad makes two errors in his little ditty - which, by the standards of factual accuracy in many songs, is pretty fair going. His first mistake is to assume that Oxford is full of clever men. Alongside the inaccuracy of this assertion about the gender makeup of the university today, when one has, as I did as an undergraduate, watched students engage in competition to see who could run into a wall the most times, the assertion of guaranteed Oxonian cleverness might justifiably be questioned as well. Though, to be fair, this sort of behaviour may have been localised to St John’s.

This brings us onto Toad’s second category error - the one which is of especial interest to us as we consider the nature of wisdom. He conflates cleverness and intelligence and then piles them both together with ‘knowing’ things. There is a tendency in our world - especially the little corner of it that is an Oxford college in Trinity term- to view the accumulation of facts or the demonstration of provable knowledge to be the be all and end all in the sphere of human achievement. We are told that knowledge is power, that
we can achieve anything if we make good use of our Bod cards and a bit of elbow grease. Yet, few people know as well as those at the heart of a university, how fickle such a system is. The gears of academia are lubricated by the disproving of x by y. The facts of today are the absurdities of tomorrow - the orthodoxies of the twenty-first century inexorably will become the heresies of the twenty-second. Indeed, human knowledge seems to be engaged in a constant cycle of proving its own futility, which is terribly postmodern of me and will, of course, be rightly decried as rubbish when the next spasm in the Hegelian death throes of Western thought comes about. A recognition of the transitory nature of human knowledge may be good for our humility perhaps but it makes it a difficult thing to pin our whole concept of wisdom on.

This, of course, is not to do down the importance of learning, in this, one of its most august seats. To know things is not something of which we ought to be ashamed. Indeed, there is a regrettable lionising of the simplistic in much of our society - from politicians rejoicing in being ‘fed up of experts’ to clergy proudly parading their lack of theology. The less you know, the better. Yet, this commits the same category error, I would argue, as those who would trumpet a Gradgrindian fetishization of facts. For both, wisdom is bound up with our own critical faculties - either sharply honed through skim reading hundreds of books and actually going to one’s lectures, or simply through the natural gift of reason, which I gather from past forays into New Atheism, if we just concentrate on really very hard, we can all deploy at will. I would suggest that true Wisdom, the wisdom referred to in the Book of Proverbs, is necessarily outside our own faculties, outside, even, the finite categories of cleverness and intelligence. It is not something we can switch on or switch off, rather it is something for which we listen, for which we watch, for which we patiently long.

Central to a healthier understanding of Wisdom is an acknowledgement of its intangibility, its refusal to be nailed down as a quantifiable quality. Ironically the way in which the Wisdom that is presented to us here is attained, is through an admitting that it is unattainable by our own efforts. Instead we are called to wait, daily, slowly, patiently. In an age of instant gratification, the slow, calm, considered can sometimes seem ridiculous. Why wait for wisdom when one can google it?

Although there are still things which evoke slowness in this city - from the pace of walkers ambling round the meadow just over there of a summer’s evening to the glacial speed at which the queue to Bridge seems to disperse of a Thursday night - these are exceptions rather than rules. On the whole, Oxford is a frenetic place where everyone is
in a hurry to make a mark as they rush through. This isn’t just true of this city and its university - in the wider world doing things at one’s own pace, rather than at the mad dash that the world runs around to, is often seen as a sign of awkwardness or eccentricity.

I am reminded of the example of one Francis Hugh Maycock- clergyman, academic (despite the fact that he managed an appalling third in history and so switched to theology, in which he managed to do even worse) and an erstwhile student of Christ Church. Maycock was bitten by a tropical fly while doing missionary work in Malawi and so would sleep for up to 18 hours most days. When asked how he ever remembered what time it was he had this answer- ‘when I wake up in my pyjamas I know it’s time for church, when I wake up in my trousers, I know it’s time for tea.’ Yet perhaps Maycock’s greatest eccentricity in the midst of this particular city was his ability to listen. It was said that all Oxford would come and pour out their problems to him and find that they simply disappeared in the clouds of tobacco smoke with which the cleric surrounded himself in a bid to stay awake. He was, I would venture, an example of how different quiet considered wisdom can be compared to the ever deepening angst of mere cleverness.

Wisdom then very often looks as if it is madness. But then, in this world, the paradoxical is so often but a heartbeat away from the true. We have heard how wisdom is so far beyond and above us but admitting that to ourselves, particularly in a modern environment or in an academic one, is a profoundly difficult thing to do. To admit that things are not as rational as we have made them or that we are not capable of attaining x, y or z is counter cultural in the extreme. Indeed, it makes us look ridiculous. Wisdom, however, does not call us to look sensible, nor even to necessarily do what is popular, rather it suggests that it is in a trusting vulnerability - the very opposite of both the accumulated knowledge of the academy and the ex machina rationality of popular imagination - that true wisdom might be found.

When I was an undergraduate, I had a friend who remains one of the brightest people I have ever encountered. One weekend we ended up in the city of Leeds, where, at about 4am as we walked back to where we were staying, he absentmindedly popped his wallet, containing money, cards etcetera into a post box. When quizzed, in no uncertain terms, why he had thought this was a good idea, he merely stated that his wallet had his address on it and it was better in the hands of the Royal Mail than his own. This act of supreme faith in the postal service caused much mirth at his expense for several days until, one morning there arrived, by recorded delivery to the college porters’ lodge, the very wallet
he’d posted in a Leeds back street about a week earlier. Whilst I’m not sure this beer
induced decision can really be defined as wisdom, it does share with the quest for wisdom
a faith in something bigger and refusal to become overly committed to the pettiness of
the day to day. The outcome shares with wisdom, a subversive note. Wisdom has a role
in scoffing at us - what we think of as sensible is subverted and ultimately turned upside
down by the truly wise. This shouldn’t surprise us, but it often does. We like nothing
more than to imagine that our constructed human systems might match up against that
which was before the beginning of the earth. We might instinctively wish to mock that
which is presented as wisdom here but, be assured, the joke will eventually be on us.

If the quest for wisdom can make us look foolish, compel us to do things outside the
confines of what society deems to be normal, and, perhaps most importantly, require
patience and humility to attain, then it is hard to ignore its similarities to the theme of
our gospel reading- that is to say Love. In the famous passage from one Corinthians, the
go to passage for weddings in diabetes inducingly saccharine Richard Curtis films, St
Paul lists the first of love’s characteristics as being patient. Proverbs states that Wisdom
was pre-existent, the very delight of God, beside Him like a master worker as the very
fabric of the universe was woven. Love too is not a purely human emotion - indeed our
love is but a pale imitation of perfect love. God is love, and in our Gospel we hear a call
to abide in love, a call that is nothing less than an invitation, via Christ, into the very
heart of the created order, into the ways of heaven, into the life of God.

We have already ascertained that much of true wisdom, with its patient waiting for a
Godot like end result and its paradoxical acknowledgement of human foolishness, very
often looks like folly. So too does true love. Love too involves sacrifice and weakness,
rather than glory and strength- yet at the centre of Christianity is the message that that
same sacrificial love is the strongest force the universe has ever known, love stronger than
death itself. Wisdom and love are both of God. Wisdom and love are both perfected in
Christ - the one who calls us to live out both in our lives here and now.

The call of wisdom, therefore, is inexorably bound up in the call of love; the call to love.
And to answer that call, the call that echoes from the height of Heaven to the depths of
our very soul, it is necessary that we must look beyond ourselves, beyond, even the ways
of this world. Both require a sacrifice of self, an acknowledgement that attainment of
these things will not be attained by our own struggle or even in our own timeframe, but
rather by a realisation of our own inability to attain them. Herein is the paradox of
wisdom, the paradox of love - the more we acknowledge our own folly, the wiser we
become. The more love we lavish on others - be that God or our neighbour - the more we store up for ourselves. The call of wisdom and the call of love are one and the same, and of the same source - the challenge, as you go out of this place into a glorious Oxford evening, is to discern what might they be asking of you.

At the end of *The Wind in the Willows*, Toad comes to the realisation that his behaviour has been destructive and self-centred, to the detriment of himself and the animals who, against the odds, have remained his friends. He realises that his acts of rebellion were not liberating at all, but simply created new and bigger problems. He realises that his increased self-regard came at the expense of his friendships with others. He realises, in short, the necessity of forces bigger than himself. Forces like wisdom and love.

So, clever men and women of Oxford - who in this exam term in particular, know all that’s to be knowed - if we can know half of much of what Mr Toad came to realise, then we might not be too far from answering Wisdom’s call after all.