



15 February 2009
Sexagesima
Choral Evensong
Proverbs 9 vv. 1–6
Ephesians 5 vv. 15–20

Reading the Bible as...



...Wisdom:

Finding what Truly Satisfies

By The Rev'd Nicholas Lombardo OP

Shortly after my ordination to the priesthood, I went with my father to the small town in Sicily where he was born. He had come to the United States when he was seven years old. I celebrated Mass there in Italian for my relatives, and afterwards they took us out for a simple meal at an *agriturismo*, an old farm converted into a restaurant.

The meal was simple but it was fantastic. Everything had more flavor; the *lettuce* had more flavor. Until then I hadn't realized that lettuce even had flavor.

This was a moment of conversion for me. Before I had never been really interested in organic food. But that was because I hadn't realized that it tasted better. Nobody had told me.

Since that meal, I've noticed things. Strawberries for example – even in my lifetime they have been getting bigger, better looking...and less flavorful.

Wisdom is like organic food: it tastes better than it looks. But we can only know that once we've tried it. From the outside, wisdom can look boring or burdensome. But from the inside, once it's tasted, everything else seems flavorless by comparison.

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There is a rich tradition in Scripture about Lady Wisdom. In many books of the Old Testament, Wisdom is personified as a woman. In the first reading tonight from the book of Proverbs, Lady Wisdom offers a meal to all who are hungry.

*Wisdom has built her house,
she has set up her seven columns;
she has dressed her meat, mixed her wine,
yes, she has spread her table.
She has sent out her maidens; she calls
from the heights out over the city:
“Let whoever is simple turn in here;”
To the one who lacks understanding, she says,
“Come, eat of my food,
and drink of the wine I have mixed!
Forsake foolishness that you may live;
advance in the way of understanding.”*

But a little further on in Proverbs, in a part not in tonight’s reading, we meet another woman inviting passers-by to her meal. Her name is Folly.

*The woman Folly acts on impulse,
is foolish and knows nothing.
She sits at the door of her house,
on a throne high up in the city,
calling to the passer-by,
who are walking straight past on their way,
“Let whoever is simple turn in here;
To the one who lacks understanding, she says,
“Stolen waters are sweet,
and bread tastes better when eaten in secret.”*

The last line is chilling:

*But he does not know that the dead are there,
that her guests are in the depths of the netherworld.*

The big red strawberries we can find everywhere look great: they big and red, but they are flavorless compared to real strawberries.

My great-grandfather in Sicily was an amateur botanist who cultivated roses. He was always very critical of those who grew roses for beauty and color but neglected fragrance: he thought it was important that you had all three. Fragrance is intangible, but it’s real.

Flavor is intangible, but it’s real. Where we get our meals —whether we eat with Wisdom or with Folly—matters. Lady Folly says that “stolen water is sweet,” but it leaves a bad aftertaste.

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Now there's a problem. Imagine you're in Jerusalem. You've never been there before. You're one of the simple who hears these two women, Wisdom and Folly, calling out, offering free food. If you're a passerby walking through the city, and you have just been invited to two free meals, how do you know which way to turn? You've never eaten with either before, how do you know who to trust for a better meal?

The uncomfortable fact is that it's hard to know which way leads to wisdom, and which way is an open trap. Think of how easy it is to fall into some addiction that starts off seeming innocuous, but then gets a hold on us and eats out from inside us the joy of life.

*To the one who lacks understanding, Lady Folly says,
"Stolen waters are sweet,
and bread tastes better when eaten in secret."
But he does not know that the dead are there,
that her guests are in the depths of the netherworld.*

This is where another proverb comes in handy, a phrase that appears frequently in the Old Testament: "*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.*" Before we can taste what wisdom has to offer, we have to trust the Lord's guidance. Otherwise we'll never get there. That trust is the first step in the right direction.

None of us gets through life without making mistakes, because none of us have been here before. This is the first time for all of us. Sometimes we end up following Lady Folly for a taste of stolen water, not realizing where she's going to lead us.

We can minimize our mistakes by trusting the Lord's guidance that comes to us through the prophets, sacred scripture, the voice of Christ and his Church, which often comes to us through the mediation of the wise men and women we know personally.

The book of Sirach describes the blessings that come to those who fear the Lord:

*He who fears the LORD will act like this;
he who is practiced in the law will come to wisdom.
[Wisdom] will come to meet him like a mother,
and welcome him like a young bride,
She will give him the bread of understanding to eat
and the water of wisdom to drink.
He will lean on her and not fall,
he will rely on her and not be put to shame.
She will raise him high above his fellows;
in the assembly she will open his mouth.
He will find happiness and a crown of joy,
he will inherit an everlasting name.*

The early Christians saw the wisdom tradition of the Old Testament fulfilled in Christ. He is the Word made flesh, Wisdom Incarnate. He provides the only food that truly satisfies. In St John's Gospel, he says, "*I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst.*"

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Every day, in literally every part of the world, the Church calls out to all nations like Lady Wisdom:

*“Come, eat of my food, and drink of the wine I have mixed!
Forsake foolishness that you may live;
advance in the way of understanding.”*

The promises of Lady Wisdom are fulfilled most of all in the Word of God, the Bread of Life, which the wise seek out.