

True Knowledge

A certain writer of the last century once penned the words: "Knowledge is a steep which few may climb." We believe these words have a greater depth of meaning than the writer himself could appreciate. Viewed in its most general sense, the world's knowledge presents to the mind a baffling concept—embracing so many fields, and inviting the uncertain and the unwary into so many uncharted channels. And so what a relief it is to the wisely-disposed to open a book—as we may all do this morning—wherein we have a complete compendium of true and life-giving instruction. Here is a knowledge which, to modify that writer's words, if it is a steep, a hill, it is one that we may all climb if we are prepared to give it our attention.

The knowledge that confronts us in our present daily portions is contained in the book of Proverbs. Let us read again the opening words: "The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel; to know wisdom and instruction; to perceive the words of understanding; to receive the instruction of wisdom, justice, and judgment, and equity ... A wise man will hear, and will increase learning; and a man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels" (Prov. 1.1-3,5).

Notice the terms used: ".. wisdom .. instruction .. understanding .. justice .. judgment .. equity .. knowledge .. " and so on. As far as we are able to tell, the Hebrew originals of these words are substantially the same in meaning as the English; or rather we should say, the English is a commendable rendering of the original. That first word wisdom gives the idea of wisdom with perhaps an emphasis on moral goodness; in its second use it is a somewhat different Hebrew word, suggesting circumspection and intelligence. Instruction indicates reproof, warning, restraint; and the other words in the list generally parallel the meaning of the originals.

These opening verses, then, give the introduction and setting to the whole of the Book of Proverbs, and we do well to dwell upon them. Let us not regard them as just an initial exhortation to the uninformed, to such as might be seeking the Truth. The Book of Proverbs, as with all Scripture, is a wealth of spiritual sustenance to all of us. So let us at the outset resolve that in the course of our current reading of the book we will heed the implied exhortation in these opening verses, and give due attention to the many wonderful and often penetrating shades of counselling which this book contains.

The attainment of excellence

Let us note the great cardinal point of Proverbs 1.7: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." There is a point behind those words which is very penetrating if we think about it a little. I suppose if we ask any of our contemporaries what they would consider to be the object of pursuing knowledge (in whatever field) they would probably answer, "The attainment of excellence in that particular field". But, of course, the question then follows: What is excellence?

There are areas where excellence is, we suppose, not a matter of controversy, and there are others where it is debatable, even a matter of personal taste. As an example take a household appliance, say for heating. All the many amenities we enjoy in these times come from technical knowledge being put into practical application; the standard of excellence depending on the refinement of applied knowledge and skill. Now, if the appliance heats well we would say, I suppose without controversy, that it is a good, perhaps an excellent article. If it failed to do so, presumably no-one would commend it.

But there are other areas of knowledge where there is room for controversy and even dispute. The external physical appearance or colour of our heating appliance may please one but not another. This is where artistry comes into the matter. The industrial designer produces what he considers a pleasant-looking product, but another designer may disagree with his ideas, and the would-be purchaser may disagree with them both. In this particular field of knowledge the scope for divergence is endless, and the pursuit of excellence is as controversial as the ideal of excellence itself.

True excellence

Now, coming right away from all these material things to those matters which concern us most dearly, we think of that Divinely revealed knowledge, wisdom and instruction which we comprehend in the term "the Truth". We will all say at once, without any gainsaying, that this is true excellence, and, as the verse in Proverbs tells us, the fear of the Lord is the beginning, the very commencement of its pursuit.

Now, having imbibed the knowledge of the Truth, and having resolved to heed the injunction in those opening words of Proverbs—as doubtless we all have, we do not have to be long in the Truth before we realise that it has to be applied knowledge. To this extent it is like other fields of knowledge. If it is just left in the mind, or written down in a notebook and put aside somewhere, then it is merely academic and no more. To be of use it has to be applied. And—this is what becomes so important in the Truth—so much of its application concerns our relations to and attitudes to one another. When this is further realised, then perhaps it is here where sometimes—to modify a little the words of that writer—knowledge can become a steep which can be climbed, but the climbing needs care, consideration and love.

If the fear of our heavenly Father is the beginning of knowledge and of wisdom, then love is the fulfilling of the law which He has given. You will recall that when one asked Christ: "Master, which is the great commandment in the law?" Jesus said unto him, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it. Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself (Matt. 22.36-9).

Now in these human relationships our knowledge—yes, even the knowledge we profess of the Truth—can sometimes be applied (we might say, wielded)

as if it were in those debatable areas of controversy instead of in the stability which is surely the very hallmark of the Truth. The corrective is love—that love which Christ commends as fulfilling the second great commandment of the law.

Loving concern

What a wonderful practical lesson we have on this very matter of loving concern in the life of Christ, for example in Luke 15. The very first thing we notice about this chapter is the large number of human characters it brings before us, some actual people, and some as depicted in the three parables in this chapter. There were the tax-collectors: men who collected revenue on behalf of the Romans and had a reputation for dubious dealing in so doing, and were thus out of general favour. Also there were those termed "sinners": those despised by the punctilious religious elite. Then there were the Pharisees and scribes. And the parables describe the shepherd who had lost one of his hundred sheep, the woman who had lost a coin, and the father with two sons, the younger being "prodigal". Reviewing these characters brings remarkable lessons.

Regarding the tax-collectors and those others of dubious repute, we read in the 1st verse of this chapter that they at any rate were anxious to "hear" Christ. They acknowledged their deficiencies, and were taking the first step as enjoined in those opening verses of Proverbs. How different it was with the Pharisees and scribes! They were not prepared even to listen. "There is nothing", they were saying to themselves in effect, "that this man can give us". In this they were despising the very fountain of true knowledge, for was not Paul later to write to the Corinthians that Christ is "the power of God and the wisdom of God"?

How did Christ counter this opposition? Strong reproof is not always appropriate. The rest of the chapter is the record of his words in the form of three parables. Now in each parable there appears a character who is really caring: one who is really concerned about something or someone lost; and the great point to be noted is that the caring attitude quite over-rides every other consideration. The circumstance that caused the loss is not nearly so great a matter of concern as the earnest need to retrieve the lost item or the lost person, and the joy when the lost is found.

The other side of the picture, of course, concerns the helpless and hopeless condition of the lost, without this over-riding care. The lost sheep was certain of a miserable end in the lonely harshness of the desert, if it were not for the tireless, diligent, and eventually successful search of the anxious shepherd.

With regard to the lost coin, to our contemporary minds it may seem strange that this woman should go to such excesses of joy upon recovering it; calling all her friends and neighbours together to an occasion of festivity that may seem to outweigh the value of the lost article. It has been suggested that the coin was part of a headdress traditionally worn by the women of the East as a wedding gift; an article regarded as so precious that tradition forbade its being

seized as a pledge or in lieu of a debt. However this may be, we have the picture of infinite concern over a loss, and overwhelming joy upon the item's recovery. In the third parable, recorded in the latter part of the chapter, we have the father of the prodigal son, bringing home with full force this lesson of compassion and concern.

All these parables were meant to make the Pharisees and scribes realise that all their punctiliousness about the Law, with all their traditions by which they set out to embellish and codify it, counted for nothing when they were unable or unwilling to perceive the grace that was being brought into their midst by the One whom Moses and all the prophets had predicted so long before. That grace would be extended not only to the tax-collectors and sinners in their midst at that time, but to the Gentiles also. And the basis of all this grace is care and concern.

The father and the prodigal son

The broad interpretation of the "prodigal" parable—the wayward son depicting the Gentiles and others outside the Law, the very correct elder son depicting Israel, ostensibly at any rate relying on the strict letter of the Law—is very clear. Sometimes this aspect of the matter has been brought to bear on the Truth in a manner that implies that firm hold on doctrines and principles is somehow of less concern than a warm, open and—it has to be said—a rather vague geniality in the community. This is quite an erroneous application. A firm hold on all the principles of the Truth has nothing in common with the Pharisaic attitude to law and tradition.

So then we have this overall picture of concern. It reminds us of the words of the apostle John in his 1st epistle: "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God" (1 John 3.1). The concern for the prodigal was typical of the Divine mercy that we have all received. That father of the two brothers had much to bestow; he was beneficent, some might say over-generous when he conceded to his younger son's plea: "Let me have my share of the family estate here and now". We might say that the son's later bitter experience illustrates the words of Proverbs 20.21: "An inheritance may be gotten hastily at the beginning; but the end thereof shall not be blessed." After the round of extravagance and folly, the headstrong young man found he had nothing left, no material resources even to keep himself alive, and was reduced to earning his living at the cost of incurring defilement under the terms of the Law—by feeding pigs.

His one redeeming feature was that he did come to his senses in this extremity: but here it was the mercy and beneficence of his father that brought about his rescue. If he had not expected to receive mercy, at least to the extent of being put on the serving staff, his position would have been hopeless indeed. But how much greater was the father's goodness! His manner of love was such that he was still very pleased to call him his son. "This my son"—no, not another addition to the serving staff—"This my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found."

This gives some insight into the measure of love and mercy that has been bestowed upon us. I wonder if we think about it enough. Our Elder Brother said to his immediate followers: "Henceforth I call you not servants ... but I have called you friends" (John 15.15). This surely shows what care the one for the other, what measured concern, we should all have as a community of brethren and sisters.

The father and the elder son

But how different with the elder brother in this parable. We have read of his angry reaction at the festivities which had been laid on. He "would not go in," we read. "What!—meet with him, after the life he has been living? He is ceremonially unclean by feeding pigs—and I, well, I've been meticulous about all these things. Yet you've killed the fatted calf for him and you've never offered me so much as a kid!"

Now we need to look into the state of mind of this character, rather than at what he had done or claimed to have done. We know what Christ said about the Pharisaic class: with all their meticulous claims they were grossly deficient, all of which stemmed from their state of mind. They were self-deceived. Their attitude of mind is indicated in such passages as Luke 7.39 where we read: "... the Pharisee ... spake within himself, saying. This man, if he were a prophet, would have known ..." Or Matthew 9.3: "... certain of the scribes said within themselves. This man blasphemeth ..." These were the thoughts in their minds regarding Jesus.

That elder son in the parable was probably very conscious that he was heir to all his father's remaining property, as the father conceded: "All that I have is thine." The portion due to the younger son had gone. He probably resented this expense on his younger brother's behalf, spent without consultation with himself. So while the father was drawn to the previously wayward son and went out to him, seeking him with open arms, here was this elder brother refusing to go in. Notice how he virtually disowned his younger brother, referring to him in talking to his father as "thy son," implying, "he's your responsibility, not mine." The father, by contrast, in intreating the elder brother, referred to him as "this thy brother," suggesting that this relationship should have been controlling that angry character's feelings.

Surely it is with these reflections in mind that we can all benefit from the parable, for it stresses, as we were saying earlier, that so much of the Truth's application (founded though it is on clear and defined principles—let that never be forgotten) concerns our relations with and our attitudes to one another. And this means discernment, thoughtfulness, the measured approach, all founded of course on that love which the Truth enjoins above all else. So our minds must be rid of all self-deception. Natural human characteristics and attitudes can so easily "colour" our responses to what we see (or think we see) in those around us. How easily we can enlist "grounds" in support of our initial reactions. But we must ask if they are real grounds, or are we conjuring up (exaggerating perhaps) impressions that a sound assessment would not justify?

Christ, the wisdom of God

Of course the dominant character in this chapter is that of the speaker of the parables, Christ himself. We recall again Paul's words: "Christ, the power of God, and the wisdom of God," and his matchless wisdom shows itself in his discerning insights into natural human character and its responses.

As we remember him again as he has bidden us, and as we identify ourselves once more with his life and his sufferings, we have both warning and comfort. Christ could, and does read all hearts. He could, and does analyse and see through all problems. He assures us that where two or three are gathered together in his name, there he is in their midst. So at this Table let us reflect that, if we are ever misunderstood, here is One who understands perfectly; if we are perhaps painfully conscious of our limitations, here is One who can achieve our forgiveness. If the pressures of life seem overwhelming, then here is One who has felt all these pressures to the extreme, and has even overcome death itself; and that conquest means victory for us all.

Yes, indeed, "what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God." May the day dawn very soon, when "he shall appear" and in God's mercy "we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is."

E.M