

Yarrow, September 19, 2010

Ps 24:2,3
 Hy 1A
 Ps 111:3,4,5
 Ps 19:3,4
 Ps 119:37,39; Hy 36:4
 Proverbs 1:1-19
 Deuteronomy 4:1-14
 LD 34.92,93

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

We're so very familiar with the law of God, and we don't find it particularly upbuilding. Sunday by Sunday we hear it declared to us – and always it's a mirror in which to compare our lives and learn again that we have fallen short of God's holy standard. It gets us down, and makes one wonder: why lay such emphasis on the law? Has our Lord not fulfilled the law, so that our emphasis ought to lie on God's love for us and hence the need to love one another? Wouldn't it be more helpful and edifying to remove it from our liturgy, or perhaps reduce the number of times (per month or year) we read the law?

We've come to that part of the Catechism that deals with the law of God. I need to draw out for you that God did not give us His law in order to make life difficult for us, to take the fun out of life; rather, God gave us His law because He wants us to *enjoy* the life He gave. Particularly the book of Proverbs tells us that the Creator of life gave His Ten Commandments to His people in order that His people-by-covenant might know how they can make the most of life. I want to work this out for you today by laying the Law of God beside the first chapter of Proverbs. The sermon may be summarized with these words:

GOD'S LAW MAKES ONE WISE TO THE CHALLENGES OF THIS LIFE.

1. What wisdom is
2. How one is wise
3. Who is perfectly wise

1. What wisdom is

Solomon, Scriptures tell us, was the wisest man of his day. That's what God promised Solomon on the day he asked for wisdom; said God: "behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you" (I Kings 3:12). In accordance with that promise, "God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and largeness of mind like the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the East, and all the people of Egypt" (I Kings 4:29f). As a result of this great wisdom, Solomon "uttered 3000 proverbs; and his songs were 1005" (4:32). Many of these proverbs and songs have become lost in the course of the ages, but some God caused to be preserved in the Bible book known to us as "Proverbs".

Our world today has countless books containing much practical wisdom, insight gleaned from years of life experience. Yet the book of Proverbs is different from the books of wisdom written by the likes of Plato or Mao, for the book of Proverbs –containing the wisdom of Solomon– is "Scripture inspired by God" and therefore is "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (II Tim 3:16f). In the book of Proverbs one finds not

the wisdom of men but the wisdom of *God*. Shall we say: in the book of Proverbs the *Creator of life* tells men about the life He made, tells men His divine wisdom about how to live that life. And the Spirit who inspired Solomon, of course, does not change, and so His instruction as caught in the book of Proverbs is as valid for today as it was 3000 years ago when the Spirit first moved Solomon to write it down.

From the first few verses of Proverbs it is obvious that Solomon wrote this book in order to teach wisdom. What, though, is this wisdom Solomon speaks about? The term 'wisdom' appears regularly on the pages of Holy Writ. Never has the term got anything to do with one's IQ, with having a keen intellect, or even with having some university degree. The term is used instead to refer to *expertise* in some trade or another. The tradesmen employed to supervise the construction of the tabernacle were, say the Scriptures, *wise* men and the point is that they were expert in their field, professionals in construction (Ex 28:3). Similarly, the Bible speaks of sailors having to put all their wisdom to work in the face of a storm at sea, and the point is that these sailors need to call upon all their expertise, all the experience they have picked up over the years on the water (Ps 107:27). Again, Scriptures speak of merchants who by their wisdom have amassed a certain fortune. The point is that their experience results in rich returns (Ezek 28:4f,12).

Now Solomon wants to write about wisdom. Yet it's not the expertise of the seaman he's writing about, nor the expertise of the carpenter. What Solomon involves himself with is *life* itself, and when he speaks about wisdom he's talking about *the how of living*. It takes experience to sail a ship from port to port, takes experience to build a tabernacle or a house or a cabinet successfully; similarly –says Solomon in Proverbs– it takes *experience* to live this life well, it takes wisdom. In as much as it's disastrous for a tradesman to entrust his work to a rookie, so too you won't get the most out of life if you try to go through life without experience, without wisdom.

We all know that no one becomes a tradesman without taking an apprenticeship; to become a qualified professional you need to learn from the hand of someone who has experience, you need to study. That is true of plumbing and carpentry; it is equally true with regard to life itself. In fact, it is *more* true for life itself than it is for plumbing and carpentry; exactly because we are all dead in sin, totally depraved, no one –if left to himself– can become truly expert at living, become truly wise in the art of living. Though one live a hundred years no sinner left to himself will understand the art of life *unless* he takes an apprenticeship in the school of the Creator of life.

It is now *this apprenticeship* –if I may say it this way– that God through Solomon would give to His people in the book of Proverbs. Here Solomon –moved by the Spirit of God– would impart wisdom and instruction, would instruct people in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity (1:3), would –in a word– teach people the art of living.

There's the reason too why Solomon in this book addresses himself repeatedly to the *youth* (cf vs 4,8). It's particularly the youth who don't have experience in living, and yet it's that practical wisdom that they need so much. I should add straightaway: the word Solomon uses in vs 4 for 'young man' does not refer to persons –say– in their upper teens. The word appears elsewhere in the Bible for anyone in the first half of life, shall we say, up to age 40 (cf II Chron 13:7). Then, yes, in vs 4 Solomon places beside the word 'young man' the word 'simple', but we're not to think that Solomon considered all youth simple, dumb; the word translated in our Bibles as 'simple' may be better translated with 'inexperienced'. These youngsters may be decent young folk, but Solomon knows that lack of experience in the art of living implies that the youth

will make silly mistakes, will make wrong judgments in the various difficulties they face. So this wisest of men in Israel considered it imperative that these inexperienced youngsters be taught, be instructed, be trained in the art of living, be given wisdom.

Yet it's not the younger only whom Solomon intends to train. He tell us in vs 5 that the 'wise man' is also to increase in learning, the man of understanding is also to acquire greater skill. The fact of the matter is that as no sailor has ever learned all there is to know about the art of sailing, and as no carpenter has ever learned all there is to know about the art of building, so too has no person ever learned all there is to know about the art of living. Though Solomon has his eye on the youth first of all, he would have every man and every woman, irregardless of age, come to his school to learn more perfectly the art of living this life.

That brings us to our second point:

2. How one is wise

How is one, then, to become expert in the art of living? The Spirit of "the only wise God" (Rom 16:27) moves Solomon to give this answer: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction" (vs 7). In that sentence, 'knowledge', 'wisdom', 'instruction' all boil down to basically the same thing; though each term has its own color, yet all refer to that basic wisdom needed to live life well, all refer to the expertise all need to get the most out of life. Of that expertise, of that basic wisdom to live life well, says Solomon, "the fear of the LORD is the beginning." There, he says, is where it all starts: fear the LORD. Without that fundamental fear of the LORD, one will never be expert at living, will never be able to get the most out of the life God gave.

"The fear of the LORD." The word 'fear' can mean one of two things. 'Fear' can refer to fright; it can refer also to awe. In Solomon's statement that "the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge", Solomon would have us know that it's not terror before God that starts one on the road to wisdom; it's rather awe for God. I'll say more on that in a moment.

It's the "fear of *the LORD*" that Solomon holds before his readers. The word 'LORD' is printed in capitals, and so refers to God's covenant name Yahweh. This is the almighty Creator of heaven and earth who claimed a people of unworthy slaves for Himself, set them free from Egypt, and established His bond of love with this people – how marvellous! This God obviously has a heart for the people He redeemed (why else would He redeem them!), and now *cares* for His people, is *concerned* for their well-being. So concerned is He for His own that He doesn't want them hurt, doesn't want them enslaved, and *that is why He gave them the Ten Commandments!* He wants them to get the most out of the life, the freedom, the opportunity He gave them, and so showed them the way to live well. The Ten Commandments: they are *God's gift of love* to His dear people.

Consider God's word to Israel in Deuteronomy 4. Says Moses: "observe [God's commandments] carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' What other nation is so great as to ... have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?" (vss 6ff). Notice what Moses says: other nations will recognize that these laws are good! More, they will notice that you Israelites are *wise in the way you live*; you know how to get the most out of life.

An example? The nations around serve Baal. That means they have to give up their daughters to be temple prostitutes. Their daughters, then, will not be happy, for making love without being in love leaves your daughter feeling used, dirty. That reality was no secret long

ago, just as it's no secret today. To get the most out of life, to enjoy life in the long term, "have no other gods before Me." You see: the LORD does not want His children-by-covenant to get hurt and then go through life with painful scars.

David understood the point. That's why he said in Ps 19 that "the law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, *making wise the simple*," making expert the inexperienced. Notice: David speaks of the law of *the LORD* – that almighty God-of-the-covenant who loves His people so much that He gives what is good for them. So he can even add that the law of the LORD makes the heart rejoice, it enlightens the eyes (Ps 19:7f) –why?– because this law tells you what you ought to do and what not to do in order to stay away from trouble and harm, what to do to get the most out of life. And there's why David in another Psalm could express his love for God's law; "Your commandment," says he, "makes me wiser than my enemies," indeed, "I have more understanding than all my teachers" (Ps 119:97ff). For the enemies don't know the tricks of life, don't know that "he who commits adultery...destroys himself" (Prov 6:32), don't know that it's foolish to initiate strife because by doing that you let loose a whole quarrel and where will that end up (Prov 17:14), and the list of possible transgressions and their resulting damage goes on and on...; any of us can make a list as long as we want. No, if one would live peacefully, if one would make the most of life in this sinful world, there is one way only to do it, and that is by *appreciating the good instruction* God has given in His Ten Commandments.

No wonder Solomon associates obedience and love for the law with "the fear of the LORD", the God of the covenant. That God would give a law that's truly helpful and beneficial in order to enjoy life the most – how gracious is He, how awesome! Anyone who stands in awe of God, who fears the LORD, will delight in His law, will *embrace eagerly* whatever He may say. To adore this God means to *accept readily* the wise instruction He gives for living this life. That fear of the LORD, that awe for this caring, gracious God, this eager acceptance of the good guidance He gives: *that*, says Solomon, is the beginning of becoming *proficient in the art of living this life*. Without that fear of the LORD, one shall never, never be able to live this life to the full.

Do not, then, congregation, *contrast* law and love, as if somehow the law is unloving, is restrictive, takes the fun out of life. Your God knows your inclination to sin, to follow your own sinful head, and so *in love for you* He gives a set of commandments that will protect you from getting hurt. How wonderful: the law is evidence of His love!!

It was with Israel of old that the Lord God made His covenant, to Israel that He gave His gracious law telling people what was good for them and what was not. It pleased the LORD in grace to make His covenant also with us. In fact, the covenant He made with us is richer than was the covenant He made with Israel. For Israel of old was delivered from a physical Egypt, from bondage to Pharaoh; the Israel of today is delivered from a spiritual Egypt, from bondage to Satan. God showed great love to His people of old in rescuing them from bondage in the Exodus from Egypt; He showed *greater love and care* for His new Israel in that He gave up His only dear Son for His own. His care for Israel of old did not stop after the Exodus from Egypt (for the LORD graciously gave His Ten Commandments to teach His redeemed people the art of living this life). So too, His care for His new Israel has not stopped either after He delivered us from bondage to Satan. Said Jesus to His disciples, and in them to the whole New Testament church: "a new commandment I give to you, that you love one another" (Jn 13:34). And what is love? It is the fulfillment of the law, yes, it is the thrust of the whole law, the heart of the law. It's with the word 'love' that Jesus elsewhere summarized the Ten Commandments: "You shall love the Lord your

God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Mt 22:37ff). That’s the summary of the law, and in as much as love is *the* command for the New Testament church are the Ten Commandments still very much in force for the New Testament church. So it’s no surprise that you find so many references in the New Testament to these Ten Commandments. God has delivered His people from bondage to Satan, and now loves His people so much that He does not wish them to wallow through life on the insights of their own depraved minds. So great is His care for us that He wants us be *wise* to this life, be experts in the art of living, and *so He gives us His law*. Remember what Paul wrote to the Romans: “He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him freely give us all things?” (Rom 8:32). God’s *law* is part of the “all things” He’s given us with Christ; He has even given to us the Ten Commandments so that we might know how to live this life to the full! Talk about care, talk about His love! That’s why we readily confess today, with David of long ago, that the law of God makes the simple, the inexperienced *wise*, gives light to the eyes. See in these commandments, brothers and sisters, something of the *grace* and the *mercy* and the *love* of your caring God and Father!!

So we are compelled, brothers and sisters, to make a decision. What do you think: what should we do with the law of God? Consider it a treasure or a nuisance? Evidence that God wants to take the fun out of our lives, or evidence that God wants us to *enjoy* life? Evidence of His interference or evidence of His care?

The question is important. Our sinful nature likes to think that we’re quite wise in ourselves, that we don’t need advice from anyone. Our society urges us to think that the divine spark inside us inherently knows what is good for us, and you sin only when you go against that inner judgment. So we can do whatever we know is OK for us. But look at the results: so many abortions are committed because folk thought it was right at the time, and countless mothers (and fathers) spend the rest of their lives weighed down by the knowledge that they have killed. So many marriage end in divorce because it was the easy way out, and countless children are victimized in the process – and the parents are not ultimately any happier. That’s human nature: how tempting, how tempting, to base ones actions “on our own opinions or on the precepts of man” (Lord’s Day 33.91), and that temptation is great for us also!

That’s why the question is so important: what do you really think of God’s law? Is it a treasure or a nuisance? It’s a question *each of us* needs to answer, and then draw the consequences consistently.

As it is, all of us fail to be the wise person God really wants us to be. That brings us to our last point:

3. Who is perfectly wise.

Despite the renewing work of the Holy Spirit, no one by nature successfully avoids all the pitfalls that meet us on the path of life be; time and again we fail to obey the good instructions our caring God has given us in His law. Yet disobedience is rebellion against the God of love, and so we get hurt – both now and eternally through the righteous judgment of God. But, congregation, there was once One who did obey God’s every instruction. Though Jesus Christ had much to learn in the school of life (cf Heb 5:8), He yet was wise from the beginning in that He knew how to apply the good laws of His Father in the various challenges He encountered. With

Him there was a deep fear of the LORD, a holy awe for His heavenly Father and so He recognized that the law He received from His Father was perfect and wise and good and wholesome –the recipe for living life well– and He made it His business to work with that law day by day, make His decisions on the basis of that law. So He was expert at living, was a master at the trade of life, knew how to live well.

No, that did not mean that the Lord Jesus Christ never grieved, never felt hurt, had a life free of difficulty. In this world of sin there was so much misery around Him, He was Himself also victim of sins from us, so that His life was not at all a paradise any more than are ours. But His appreciation for God and His law had made Him wise so that He never brought misery upon Himself by sinning. And therein He is ever an example to all. He feared His God, and so was wise, and so in turn He knew how to live this life to the full. Not for nothing did Jesus say of Himself that He was the “greater than Solomon” (Mt 12:42), the One who surpassed Solomon in wisdom and understanding.

Then came the day when His life fell apart around Him. On the cross He was made sin, and because of the sin God saw in Him could His life no longer receive God’s holy blessing; His life became a living hell with God His greatest enemy. Yet even in the midst of that living hell Jesus did not follow His own opinions or the precepts of men; He continued steadfastly to appreciate God’s good laws and so faced the challenges of the cross by obeying those laws. His God had said that it would never be advantageous to have another god in place of Yahweh, and so Jesus on the cross –though rejected by God– did not withdraw His trust from God and place it in another. His God had said that it would never be helpful to curse God, and so Jesus on the cross –though cursed by God– did not revile God in turn. His God had said that it would never be of benefit to hate another person, and so Jesus on the cross –though rejected by all around Him– hurled no words of hatred at a single bystander. He acted only “in accordance with the law of God.” Though God and neighbour alike hated him, He continued to love both God and neighbour alike – and lo, He was allowed to rise from the dead, to live eternally in the holy courts of His gracious Father! Talk about knowing the recipe to live!!

Of what benefit to us is His obedience to God’s law? This: the Lord God writes His obedience to our account! Though we transgress God’s law day by day, God does not damn us because of it; He instead attributes Christ’s obedience to us – and so He looks upon us as if we never had nor committed a single transgression against any of God’s commands! You see: *His obedience is our salvation!*

And not only that! This same Jesus has poured out His Holy Spirit upon all His own, and that Spirit –say the Scriptures–is *the Spirit of wisdom* (Isaiah 11:2). That Spirit renews, converts sinners so that these sinners might fear God, might so stand in awe of Him, and so in turn live not according to their own precepts but according to the law of the Creator of life. That Spirit *you* have, beloved, and so Yes, *you* can be wise, you can be experts at living, you can be adept at obeying God’s good law in the circumstances of your lives.

No, that’s not to say that you have now arrived, that you need not study the Ten Commandments anymore, need not reflect on whether you indeed obey the Ten Commandments adequately in your life. We hope in the coming weeks to listen to God’s good instruction in each of the Ten Commandments, hope to do that so that –as Solomon said– “the wise man ... may ... increase in learning, and the man of understanding acquire skill” (1:4).

Meanwhile, the fact of the matter remains: by God’s grace, through the working of the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ we may be wise, made proficient at living. Such is the love and care of

our Father: He's given us His law, has written that law upon our hearts so that we might be able to make the most of the life He graciously gave us in Jesus Christ. Indeed, what a God we're allowed to serve, *how deep His care for us.*