

Knowledge ...

The beginning of the book of Proverbs is both beautiful and evocative of a world that God desires for us:

*For learning about wisdom and instruction,
for understanding words of insight,
for gaining instruction in wise dealing,
righteousness, justice and equity;
to teach shrewdness to the simple,
knowledge and prudence to the young –
Let the wise also hear and gain in learning,
and the discerning acquire skill,
to understand a proverb and a figure,
the words of the wise and their riddles.
The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction.*

Proverbs 1. 2-7

In this extraordinary book of the Bible, learning is seen as a continuing process which fits us to make the right way through life. Learning is seen as making a person beautiful, 'a fair garland' and as a way of keeping us out of entanglement in life's problems and snares: 'for in vain is the net baited while the bird is looking on' (Proverbs 1.17). So learning is not just about amassing facts or gaining handfuls of qualifications; it is about a process of discernment and of finding out the right way to live and behave. The 'beauty' it gives us is a witness to others. Foolishness, or 'folly', in Proverbs, is not about being

stupid or unable to learn, but about not bothering to use what we experience, and not using reflection to make the right choices about how to live. Lifelong learning, then, feeds directly into 'righteousness, justice and equity'. Commitment to learning changes our environment and makes the kingdom of God possible.

Learning and right living are also dependent on faith. The unknowable mystery of God is at the heart of our learning, reminding us that the ability to wonder, and to perceive the mystery of the creation with awe, sets our learning in

context. We need lifelong learning, not only to remind ourselves of how much more there is to know, wrestle with and marvel at, but also that our ultimate destiny with God promises us a more complete knowledge and final understanding: 'Now I know only in part; then I will know fully' says St Paul, in 1 Corinthians 13.

Much of this is set out in the gospels, too. We know that learning was an important part of Jesus' early life, and that learning is also equated with spiritual growth: 'And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour' (Luke 2.52). It is only on the basis of this formation, both within his Jewish family and debating with others in the Temple, that Jesus becomes the more familiar Teacher of his public ministry. Yet how different a teacher Jesus is from the scribes and the Pharisees, who use a dry legalistic knowledge to try and trick and trap him. Jesus is surprised and delighted by people's insights, responses and questions. Moreover, when Jesus calls his disciples, it is not on the basis of how much they know already, but whether their hearts are open and they



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and wisdom

are ready and willing to receive his teaching and have their lives moulded by it. No wonder Jesus was exasperated and talked about those others who were deaf to the truth, about hardness of heart and about the need to become as little children, open to new experiences and to wondering about the world. Sometimes he just could not get past the intransigence of people who had decided they knew all the answers already. He didn't mind if people made mistakes, or got things wrong; the whole point of lifelong learning with God is that open hearts and minds can always be surprised, be encouraged and be used to

transform the world. It is when we become apathetic and closed, that we fail to discern God's will. So it is not surprising that Jesus taught in parables, encouraging people to think about the 'riddles' they pose and getting people to engage with them. Jesus made people imagine. He made people think, so they would go out and do.

Jesus also pointed to the need to have learning tempered with humility. There was no point the disciples arguing about who was the greatest, when there was so much left to learn. Their learning had to extend beyond Jesus' death, into the awesome and mind-shattering idea and

reality of his resurrection, and to learn what the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost now meant to their lives and witness. And this is still true for us; Christian lifelong learning includes immersing ourselves in the wisdom of scripture and Christian tradition and letting that same Spirit inform and nurture the new things we learn and do for Christ every day in every part of our lives. People should be able to perceive our wisdom, our 'beauty', and see in it effective witness to the Teacher of all, Jesus Christ. ■

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lifelong learning