

The Pursuit of Wisdom

In the name of him who is found in his Father's House, dear friends in Christ: It's a familiar story to most of us: a man travels great distances, crosses deserts, suffers severe deprivations and extremes of weather. Then at last, nearing the end of his torturous journey, he makes the treacherous climb up an impossibly steep mountain. At the top he finds an Indian guru sitting in the lotus position, meditating and chanting his mantra: "Ommm, yammi, yammi, yammi." At last he looks up. "What is it you seek?" the guru asks the man. "Master Salami-Boloni", he replies, "What is the secret to attaining happiness and fulfillment?" We expect an answer that's profound and insightful – or at least one that's practical, like "Eat right, exercise, and get plenty of sleep." But no, the guru shrugs his shoulders, smiles, and says, "If I knew the answer to that, do you think I'd be sitting up here on top of this mountain?"

A second story: one that's probably not as familiar to most of us. This one comes from a series of books that begins with *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Has anyone read those? Anyway, the third book in the series describes how all the best minds got together and built a ginormous super-computer. They create it for one reason: to have it give them the answer to the ultimate question of the Meaning of Life, the Universe, and Everything. They work on it for ages. And when it's all done, they punch in their question. The machine goes to work, performing billions of calculations every nanosecond. Seven and a half million years later, it finally it spits out a response. "The answer to the ultimate question of the meaning of life, the universe, and everything is: 42." And that supposedly is the correct answer. The problem is that no one knows what the ultimate question is.

One more; this is a true story. When I was on vicarage (too many years ago), I was able to watch Elizabeth Clair Prophet on public television. She was the head and high priestess of the Church Universal and Triumphant, a religious cult that's headquartered on a sprawling ranch in Montana just north of Yellowstone Park. Their faith is a fusion of ideas borrowed from Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and other sources, sprinkled heavily with various Spiritist elements; that is, they claim to receive direct messages from what they call the Ascended Masters: spirits of especially enlightened religious teachers from the ancient past. It's spooky stuff. Anyway, one day I tuned in as she was telling her followers that she was going to let them in on one of life's greatest secrets. She spent at least ten minutes building it up: how this bit of wisdom would improve their health and loves lives, how it would increase their mental function and acuity, and how it would open the doors to untold levels of success, prosperity, and happiness. Meanwhile her listeners are getting excited, anticipating some truly mind-blowing revelation. Finally she asks them, "Are you ready for me to tell you the secret?" They're all whooping and hollering, "Yes! Yes! Tell us!" I am not making this up. She reaches into her podium and pulls out a daikon radish – one of those great big, white ones. She holds it over her head triumphantly and says, "This is it!" Her followers are all going, "Ahhhhh!" I nearly fell off my chair laughing.

Okay, so maybe you're wondering where I'm going with these little stories. It's this: they all illustrate the same thing; namely, the pursuit of wisdom. We humans have an instinctive need to know: to know what, to know how, to know why, to know when, and to know who. Like *Prairie Home Companion's* detective Guy Noir, we're always looking for the answers to life's most perplexing questions. We have the sense that the truth we seek is out there, and that we

need to pursue it until we find it. The trouble, as the examples I gave show, is that we have a long history of looking for it in all the wrong places.

It goes back to the very beginning, when our first parents were told they could become wise by disobeying the Word of the Lord and eating the forbidden fruit. Before then, they had only known good. That day they learned about evil – and they discovered to their immediate regret and shame that it had become a part of them. And the evil in them led them away from the Lord. When they heard him coming, they fled. Fortunately for them, the Lord went after them and called them back to himself; but their descendants have been doing the same thing ever since: fleeing from the Lord who is the ground and source of all wisdom, knowledge, insight, meaning, understanding, and purpose. And left without the true source of these things, they've been forced to try to find them in other places.

That's why we see people turning to Indian gurus, or to science, to philosophy, to cults and false religions, to the occult – the so-called dark arts, and to all kinds of other things that promise to provide them with the answers they're after. And to be sure, for a while any of these things can seem to satisfy one's insatiable quest for wisdom. There's a lot to learn. This is especially true of various fields of science. One could spend a lifetime studying chemistry or astronomy or physics or biology and still have tons more to discover. But what good is it to know everything there is to know about the stars if you don't know the God who made them and set them in the heavens? What good does it do to make fantastic new discoveries about how living cells operate if you don't know the Lord who designed them and gave them life? There will be a lot of geniuses in hell. But then what good will all their learning and knowledge be?

The Scriptures are clear on this: the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. That is to say, if you don't know that there is a God to whom you are accountable for your actions, who will one day call you into judgment and punish you for your sins – and if that doesn't fill you with grave consternation – then you don't know anything worth knowing at all. Without the fear of the Lord you could have an IQ of 250 and a dozen academic degrees, but you'd still be a damned fool.

Only with a healthy and proper fear of the Lord are you on the way to true wisdom, because it's going to get you to ask the next all important question, which is "What must I do to be saved?" To this question the Scripture gives two different answers. The first is "Love the Lord your God and keep his commands. Perfectly. Always. Without fail. Do this and you will live." It's a good answer. It's a truthful answer. And unfortunately some people take it wrong; but that's because they don't have a proper fear of the Lord. Instead they imagine that they're doing all right, that they're actually loving the Lord with their whole heart and keeping his commands, or that the Lord grades on a curve and since they're doing better than most and trying real hard, that'll be enough to get by. This is self deception. And again, it comes from not truly fearing the Lord; because if someone had the slightest inkling about with how much white hot fury the Holy God hates sins and those who commit them, they could never think such a thing.

No, the first answer the Scripture gives to the question, "What must I do to be saved?" is not meant to give you encouragement as you work to save yourself. It's meant to lead you to despair. It's meant to show you that you cannot save yourself, because it's at that point that you are ready to receive true wisdom – true wisdom unto salvation which is not merely some information or lofty idea; no, it's a person, namely Jesus Christ. *He* is the wisdom of God.

This is what Paul is saying in today's Epistle. "In [Jesus Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he has lavished upon us, in *all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will* according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time ..." That is to say, if you know Jesus, God's Son who was born in human flesh to be our Savior, who lived for us the perfect life we could not live, who died for us as the perfect sacrifice, and who rose again from the dead, then you know the real answer to the ultimate question of the meaning of life, the universe, and everything. Then you have true wisdom – wisdom that gives eternal life and an inheritance in God's everlasting kingdom.

Friends, we have been given this wisdom, not because we sought it, not because we were worthy of it in any way, not because we deserved it. God gave us this wisdom because of his grace and love for us in Christ Jesus. Through him we have been adopted into God's family and have received his Holy Spirit, who now dwells within us. And through the Spirit, the Lord calls us to pursue even more of his wisdom. For this we're given two examples in today's other readings. First is the example of Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived – save the Lord Jesus himself. And what made Solomon so wise? It began with his humility. It began with him knowing how little he knew and understood, and how much he had to learn in order to properly serve the Lord and his people. But by God's grace he knew where to look for wisdom. He knew to ask the Lord who is pleased to give wisdom to those who pursue it from him.

And then we have the example of Jesus himself. It's one of the most remarkable stories in the Bible, how Jesus at twelve years of age goes into the temple courts to hear the teachers of the Scriptures and ask questions of them. And this is where a lot of people go wrong. They assume that Jesus, being God in addition to being human, already knew all the answers and it was him teaching them. But that's not what the text says. And the very idea betrays a misunderstanding of how Jesus lived during his time on earth. It's true that he is God, but the Scriptures tell us that in his time among us he emptied himself of his divine properties. That is, he lived as one of us, not utilizing his divine knowledge and powers. So he had to learn like everyone else – though he did so without sin.

But now here's what's really fascinating: the Scriptures are all about Jesus and God's plan to save us through him. In fact, Jesus is called the Word of God made flesh. So, it's not just that the Scriptures are *about* Jesus. They are, properly understood, Jesus put down on the page; Jesus inscriptured, if you will. So when Jesus, who at 12 years is considered a man in Jewish society and is finally able to go to where the great Bible scholars are teaching on the inner porches of the temple, there's no holding him back. He wants to be there learning about himself. Through the Scriptures he is, in a sense, looking into a mirror and getting to know himself and what his Father's plan is for the salvation of the world.

My point is that if wise King Solomon sought to be filled with wisdom from the Lord, and if Jesus himself eagerly sought to be made wise through the careful study of God's Holy Word, how much more should we who are so often foolish, humbly acknowledge how little we know Jesus, the Word and wisdom of God, and diligently seek to know him better? This is the danger, of course: that we think we know it all, that there's nothing more to learn, or that we're able to get by with a bare minimum. God made us to pursue his wisdom. Therefore let's do it, and in the coming year give ourselves over to the pursuit of the true wisdom that God loves to grant to us through the increasing knowledge of his Son. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!