



The Round Church at
St Andrew the Great
Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 16th January 2005
by Mark Ashton

10p

Proverbs 1:1-9; 2:1-22

How to Cope with Life

1. Introduction: Verses 1:1-7

Proverbs – what? – help to cope with life

‘Repeat out loud these powerful affirmations:

I am going to be happy today!

Though the skies are cloudy and grey,

No matter what comes my way –

I am going to be happy today! . . . I’m happy.

I really am happy. I have great possibilities within me.’

I’m quoting from the pages of a self-help book called *Move Ahead with Possibility Thinking*. It dates from back in the 1980s, but as we know, there is always a market for such books which claim that they will help us to cope with life, to be successful, to find happiness: *I’m going to be happy today!* Whether it’s by unearthing our own hidden potential, or by making friends and influencing people, or by meditating, or by improving our self-image in some way, or changing our diet, or rearranging the furniture, or clutching crystals; whatever it might be. The secret of success in life has always been eagerly sought. And the Christian believer should not be too superior, because in the Book of Proverbs the Bible has its own ‘How to be Successful in Life’ book. Look again to how it begins: *‘The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: for attaining wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insight; for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair; for giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young—let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance—for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise’* (vv. 1-6).

Proverbs is a very practical down-to-earth, day-to-day book. It doesn’t have much to say about theological matters like the Covenant, or the worship of the Temple. It’s set in the ordinary, secular, every-day world. But, because its world does not sound very much like our world in Cambridge today (it was written about 3,000 years ago in the ancient Near East), we can fail to recognise how down-to-earth a book it is. Nor do we normally teach in this way: we don’t use proverbs as a teaching method much. ‘A stitch in time saves nine’ is not a regular part of the Primary School curriculum. But we need to understand the teaching method of this Old Testament book from the outset, because (quite like proverbs today) its purpose is not actually to provide us with a technique for successful living, but to provoke us to think. And that is how proverbs work, don’t they? They’re sort of cryptic: as the Spanish say, ‘A shroud has no pockets’. We have to think about that, don’t we?—to see the point of it. Or we might say, ‘Never insult the crocodile until after you have crossed the river.’ It just gets you thinking. Apparently the Turks say, ‘If you meet a bear on a bridge, call it Auntie.’ Yes, you have to think a little bit: to puzzle it out. Or then, ‘If you’re confident after you’ve just finished an exam, it’s because you do not know enough to know better.’ (I’m not sure that is a proverb; it’s probably an aphorism).

But that is how the Book of Proverbs is going to teach us: it’s going to provoke us to think, to ponder more deeply on life—to keep learning, however old we may be. Look again at verses 5 and 6 of chapter 1: ‘. . . *let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance—for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise.*’ Do you remember how Jesus taught so much in parables? Not, as we may

have been taught in Sunday School: to make spiritual truth clear or memorable, but actually to get us to think more deeply. His parables are intentionally puzzling, They drove the casual and indifferent listener away from Him. But they intrigued and captivated the serious seeker.

Proverbs similarly provokes us to a serious search for the secret of life. And one of the great themes of the book (as we shall see) is that the secret of successful living will not be found without serious application and hard work. The only place that success comes before work is in the dictionary (that's a bit of a proverb in itself—but not original I have to say). So the Book of Proverbs, in its very method of communication, sets us to work, to think, to ponder, to meditate, to search for the secret of successful human life.

Now, those of us who are Christian believers have already found that secret in Jesus Christ, and so we come to the book knowing that when it speaks of wisdom (especially in those passages where wisdom is portrayed as a person) it is speaking to us about Jesus Christ, who is according to Paul in 1 Corinthians, *the Power of God and the Wisdom of God*. For others of us here who don't yet know Jesus in that way, I hope these five sermons on the Book of Proverbs are going to provide you with a very good introduction to Him. But we will have to be prepared to think.

I have to say that if you're not prepared to, the next few minutes are going to be wasted, and coming back to hear more of these sermons will be a bit of a waste! But I want you to come back, so I want you to be prepared to think, if you would.

So let's consider how the Book of Proverbs works in helping us to cope with life.

2.Proverbs – how?

a. Priority (1:8, 9 & 2:1-5)

First, it teaches us to set a priority in our lives, to recognise what matters most. The book repeatedly urges us to make a choice: to choose to listen is the way it often puts it: *'Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching. They will be a garland to grace your head and a chain to adorn your neck'* (1:8, 9). It's a theme that we'll come back to many times and we must never underestimate the importance of that choice: *'My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding, and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God'* (2:1-5). Understanding and knowledge come to those who seek them diligently, energetically, single-mindedly. It matters how you and I live our lives here on this earth, and among the many voices telling us how best to do it, there is only one to be trusted: the voice of wisdom which will direct us to the God who made us.

Making sense of life does not happen by accident. It isn't a chance discovery. It comes to those who seriously look for it: *'... and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure ...'* (vv. 3, 4). That search requires discipline and at times even pain. Wisdom cannot be acquired without pain—so how foolish we 21st Century parents are when we try to ensure that our children live pain-free lives!

The first step in coping with life, according to the Book of Proverbs, is to put first things first; to recognise what matters most and then to pursue it, even though it costs us time and energy and self-discipline and even pain. But then we will find that this wisdom is personal: it is all about relationships.

b. Relationship (2:5-11)

'... then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom, and from his mouth comes knowledge and understanding. He holds victory in store for the upright, he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless, for he guards the cause of the just and protects the way of his faithful ones.' (2:5-8). What we search for, God gives: *'For the Lord gives wisdom, and from his mouth comes knowledge and understanding'* (v. 6). He gives it by revelation: *'... from his mouth comes knowledge and understanding.'* He speaks, and as we respond to what He has said to us, our lives become meaningful and

secure: *'He holds victory in store for the upright, he is a shield to those who walk blameless, for he guards the cause of the just and protects the way of his faithful ones.'* And the meaning and security that you and I need in life are to do with knowing the difference between good and evil, between right and wrong: *'Then you will understand what is right and just and fair—every good path. For wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul. Discretion will protect you, and understanding will guard you'* (vv. 9-11).

So this relationship is, on the one hand, gracious—it is one-sided: it's not something we have deserved or earned. It is given by God, an infinitely superior being, on one side, to you and me, infinitely inferior on the other. But if it is gracious it is also moral. It is about being upright and blameless (v. 7); just and faithful (v. 8). It is about (v. 9) understanding what is right and just and fair—'every good path'. When you have a guest to stay at home you try to remember what they like and what they dislike, in order to make their stay pleasant: that they like coffee for breakfast, rather than tea; that they are allergic to cats; that they like to watch *The Bill*, but that they're bored by cricket. If you and I are going to have a relationship with God, we need to remember what He is like: that He is a God who hates evil and loves righteousness. He will not stay with us, and we may not walk in His presence in life, if we are doing the opposite. But if God does walk beside us through life, then we have found the greatest security any human being can ever know: *'Then you will understand what is right and just and fair—every good path. For wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul. Discretion will protect you, and understanding will guard you'* (vv. 9-11). We have no idea what 2005 will hold for each of us here in this building at the moment: but there is a promise that you will be guarded and protected, whatever it may be.

So Proverbs teaches us to get our priority clear and to establish our relationship with God. And also to identify the opposition.

(c) Opposition

The reason we're going to need protection and security in 2005, if we are believers seeking to walk with God through this year, is because there are forces ranged against us.

– The Peer Group (vv. 12-15)

'Wisdom will save you from the ways of wicked men, from men whose words are perverse, who leave the straight paths to walk in dark ways, who delight in doing wrong and rejoice in the perverseness of evil, whose paths are crooked and who are devious in their ways' (vv. 12-15). The person who is walking with God is walking the opposite way to the rest of the world. Again and again as believers we have to have our eyes opened to that (if you are not a Christian believer you are walking the way of the rest of Cambridge, the rest of the culture—so this won't be apply to you). But if we are believers, then we know that we're going in a different direction, marching to the beat of a different drum. And yet how much we let our peers influence and control us! When it comes to our holidays, how we spend our leisure time (how we're going to spend the long Vac. this summer), the clothes we wear, the way we furnish our rooms and our houses—how much do we let God tell us what to do? And how much do we look at our next-door neighbours, the people living beside us? Let's face it, the advertising industry is not interested in godliness; it is not concerned about good and evil, so why do I let it have such a hold over my life? The advertisers are not interested in getting me to heaven. But all the time I let them influence and control my appearance, my leisure time, what I spend my money on.

Now I don't think that Christians are all meant to be different from the world in the same way. I don't think there's any sort of 'Christian conformed non-conformity'! It's not that if you look at a person you would think, "He's a Christian; he's always shabby; his room's a mess" But I am certain that we are all meant to be different in some ways. And are we up for that? Or is being different a cost too high to pay for wisdom?

Well, beware the pressure of the peer group—it hates you and me being different.

– Promiscuity (vv. 16-19)

But as well as the pressure of 'wicked men' here in Proverbs chapter 2, there is the pressure of the adulterous woman: *'It will save you also from the adulteress, from the wayward wife with her seductive words, who has left the partner of her youth and ignored the covenant she made before God. For her house leads down to death and her paths to the spirits of the dead. None who go to her return or attain the paths of life'* (vv. 16-19). There

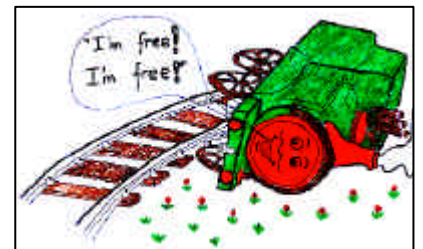
are few things in the Book of Proverbs more contemporary than what it has to say about sexual promiscuity. It is another theme to which the book will return again and again. Promiscuity promises us life, but it provides us with death: *‘For her house leads down to death and her paths to the spirits of the dead. None who go to her return or attain the paths of life’* (vv. 18, 19).

Again and again in the modern cinema, in almost every film that one encounters (certainly in a 12, a 15 or an 18), you reach that point where the hero leaps into bed with the heroine. And the message of the film is clear: “This is it—this is the climax of life; these naked figures writhing on a bed together—that is romantic love consummated in sexual intercourse with no reference to marriage—THIS IS LIFE” says the film. “No,” says the Book of Proverbs, “THAT IS DEATH.” You could not have two more contradictory verdicts on the same act, could you? Life/death. It is not that Proverbs is condemnatory of sex incidentally: it is more explicitly approving of it than any other book in the Bible, including the Song of Solomon. I’m not going to tell you where, or you will all start looking it up now. You’ll have to take my word for it or come and get the reference from me later. It would have loved the title that a previous curate of this church, Christopher Ash, gave to that book he wrote on marriage: *Sex in the Service of God!*

Sex and peer pressure—are you and I weak before them? So how does Proverbs help us to cope with life? It tells us to set the priority for our lives; to establish a personal relationship with God, and to identify the opposition: the pressure of our peers and promiscuous sex. From 3,000 years ago, speaking of the same forces that you and I are up against at the moment.

And Chapter 2 ends with a reminder of what it is to be truly human: *‘Thus you will walk in the ways of good men and keep to the paths of the righteous. For the upright will live in the land, and the blameless will remain in it [that’s a picture of life under God’s rule, in His kingdom—where He means us to be]; but the wicked will be cut off from the land, and the unfaithful will be torn from it’* (vv. 20-22). Goodness and happiness cannot be separated. That is, in fact, the secret of coping with life. You and I were made to be good, to walk with our God. This earth was created to be inhabited by men and women who put God first, and because they put God first, live their lives to serve others.

Those self-help, human potential guides to success and happiness that I was referring to at the start of this sermon—they try to remove morality from the equation. But the Book of Proverbs tells us we will never be happy without being good. Every voice that says anything else to us about what it is to be human, to be fulfilled, to be free, is as foolish as the train in this little Thomas the Tank Engine cartoon:



Over on his side, tumbled off the rails, saying, “I’m free! I’m free at last. I’ve fallen off the rails and I’m free!” How stupid that is, isn’t it?

How stupid the created beings who think that they can live in a created world as if they aren’t created; as if they’d made themselves! As if they were a product of blind chance, and could do what they like with their lives—instead of listening to the Creator God. *‘Thus you will walk in the ways of good men and keep to the paths of the righteous. For the upright will live in the land, and the blameless will remain in it; but the wicked will be cut off from the land, and the unfaithful will be torn from it.’*

In order that we might walk that way and live in that land, God has found a way to deal with sin. And that is what this service is going to end with: as we prepare to move to the words of the Communion, and so end with this act where we remember the way God has brought you and me back to Himself, if we are believers.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)