

In the Gospel of John, it is John the Baptist, speaking about Jesus, who explains that this is also the strength of “In the beginning ...” there: “He who comes after me ranks ahead of me ... because he was before me”.

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While, at creation, God finds Wisdom delightful, and, at creation, Wisdom finds the human race delightful, this happy, cascading appreciation ... is not reciprocated. Wisdom might delight in the human race but the human race does not delight in Wisdom.

Wisdom is a candid truth-teller, honest and straight herself. She does not contort or warp the truth, and hates duplicitous speech, but it abounds. Wisdom loves counsel and competence and understanding and offers to give it to people, but it remains rare.

Though Wisdom holds human happiness in her hand, she has repeatedly to ask the human mortal to listen. And, as every parent knows, children are only asked to listen the second and third, or 100th time, because they have not listened the first time.

So, Wisdom’s primary authority to counsel the truth that makes for happiness and life ... leads only to the foreboding last word in Proverbs chapter 8, which is “death”. “All those who hate [wisdom] love death”.

Those who work in the human sciences can now document all the behavioural devices we chronically use to avoid listening. But Wisdom knew this long ago. We may carelessly or defensively brush her aside, but Wisdom has seen it all before and is waiting for us: “... brush it not aside,” she says.

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In the light of this unrelenting unwillingness to listen, God takes a new initiative, as we hear in the prologue of the Gospel of John.

A gospel is not a biography. It is not an account of a life with a sufficient account of a death attached. It is an account of the death, with a sufficient account of the life attached. And the foreboding of death with which Proverbs 8 concludes, is all over these opening verses of John – as “darkness”, as non-recognition, as non-acceptance.

We’re not much good at listening, but in these things, we are expert! We like to think that we shine a light on God. But it is God who shines a light on us and this is what God’s light reveals – rejection of God’s very goodness.

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Of course, there are those who believe ... but not many. For Wisdom and the Word both insist that part of the very constitution of believing is facing and accepting and confessing the truth – not our own self-justifying half-truth, full of all that warping and contorting Wisdom explicitly repudiated for herself, that duplicitousness Wisdom explicitly hates ... but the truth our victim tells.

To receive Jesus and to believe in him necessarily includes receiving and believing his unflattering account of what our belligerent blood and wilful flesh do to his grace and truth.

For there is no reconciliation without this confronting truth, which is also potentially liberating truth.

Even at the level of human politics, this is sometimes recognized, as in South Africa’s post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission process.

Here in Australia, public relations agencies are now on to a craving for even bitter truth amidst all the spin.

Some institutions wondering what to do after allegations of child sexual abuse are now advised by secular professionals: Make a straight

confession, give an unreserved apology, promise to reform ... and do it early.

In a trivial example, this has clearly been the public relations advice to Optus, over its failure to transmit the FIFA World Cup properly. In its full-page confession in today's newspaper it does all these things, sort of.

For its boldest type is reserved for attempting to make a joke of it. Only its faintest type is used in an attempt to apologize for it, and its promise, "It'll never happen again", is carefully contingent. Talk about contortion!

Those who suffer do not want faint apologies and vacuous promises.

Those who suffer want their account of their suffering to be believed ... and part of believing in Jesus' name is believing his account that, when he came to us full of grace and truth ... we crucified him.

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It can only be our humble prayer that,
beyond our relentlessly grace-punishing and truth-resisting culture,
there is an ever-creative power of God
that does will to bring us to new birth as God's offspring;
that it is still true that God's light in Christ shines in the darkness,
that it is still true that the darkness does not overcome it.

Amen.

Margaret Tyrer

Together in Song 560 547 447 497 658

Readings and hymns were chosen by Dr Sue Boorer and Dr Nancy Ault.

Proverbs 8:22-32 and John 1:1-18 29.6.18 Murdoch Worship Centre

Grace and Truth

Proverbs 8:22 says, "... at the beginning". John 1:1 says, "In the beginning ...".

Because this chapter of Proverbs goes on to list material realities, such as springs and sources of water, mountains and hills, earth, ground and soil, heavens, horizons and clouds, fountains of the deep and the bounds of the sea, we may think that the writer was interested in "the beginning" in the same way as a twenty-first century physicist is.

Our cosmologists search and sift and measure the evidential after-glow, "more properly known as the cosmic microwave background (CMB)", I'm advised, to reconstruct what must have happened at the material beginning, and then they have things to say about a Big Bang.

Apparently, whatever happened at the beginning of material reality has important things to teach our understanding of current material reality, and even our expectations of future material reality. One prominent physicist speaks of a long-term future of deepening darkness, in which even stars will become imperceptible to us, and will have to be believed to exist, on the basis of what is written about them in books.

Proverbs 8 does use a brief account of ancient physical cosmology to make its point: Picture a three-tiered creation, with waters beneath, a flat earth in the middle, and heavens above, all on firm foundations. But "at the beginning ..." carries a different weight in Proverbs than it does in physics.

In Proverbs, "at the beginning ..." is part of an assertion of authority, of a primary right to be heard. Wisdom's intimate relation with God since the beginning makes her a teacher of unparalleled position, power and prestige.