

**Street-wise**

*Proverbs 1:20-33; Mark 8:27-38*

*Street-wise – adjective:* Having the shrewd awareness, experience, and resourcefulness needed for survival in a difficult, often dangerous urban environment. Having the necessary knack, personality and instinct for survival in rough, urban environments. I wonder what that might look like in the mean streets of Morningside? What kind of shrewd awareness and resourcefulness we might need to survive? The opening hours of Waitrose? The route of the 23 bus? What's on at the Dominion? What kind of under-garmenture to wear, or not wear, with your fur coat?

Many eloquent voices make claims about how to live in the real world: talk-show hosts, social media 'influencers', cultural commentators; experts in every field you might think of; politicians; journalists; life coaches. The Church is but one voice among many, clamouring for the attention of the marketplace.

The writer of the Book of Proverbs would have understood our challenge. *"Wisdom cries aloud in the street; in the market she raises her voice; on the top of the walls she cries out; at the entrance of the city gate she speaks..."*<sup>1</sup> How is God's voice, God's wisdom, to be heard in the streets and the public squares of 2024, in a culture bombarded with so many messages today?

It is a question that the Church of Scotland, and all faith families, are faced with today. With serious challenges about a declining church membership, with fewer resources both in terms of people and finance what is to be done so that the good news we believe in is at least heard in our world today?

Neil Glover in his book, *Finding our Voice*, tells of the American Episcopalian Barbara Brown Taylor visiting modern-day Turkey, the ruins of a twelfth-century cathedral which had been built by the

ancient but now vanished Christian kingdom of Georgia. Walking around the cathedral's ruined walls, she was overwhelmed by the vast size and grandeur of what it had once been; yet side-chapels were now rubbish tips and children played football in the nave. 'It is one thing to talk about the post-Christian era,' she wrote, 'it is another to walk around inside it.'<sup>ii</sup> Is that where we are heading? Is that what is happening when the world, our communities, resist the voice of Wisdom crying out in the streets; who have little interest in what we believe or who we are? Is no one listening to what we have to say, or wanting what we have to offer?

A couple of weeks ago I passed South Morningside Primary School at the end of its school day. A number of youngsters passed me on Comiston Road. "Hello, Dr Browning", from some. Little shy hand waves from others. "That's our minister", said another. "And we like going to our Church. We're going again for Harvest." Does it fill our pews? No. Is it a sign of revival sweeping our streets? Of course not. But somehow, against the odds, the services we offer the school plant little seeds that might, in some, grow. It is not what it used to be, but it is still something, and street-wise wisdom whispers to us, "Don't give up. You're not finished yet."

Even in Old Testament days, Lady Wisdom was having a hard time. *"...I have called and you refused to listen, have stretched out my hand and no one has heeded, and you have ignored my counsel..."* Her warning is stark, to ignore wisdom is to choose destruction. But, for those who listen to Her, they, *"...will dwell secure, and will be at ease..."* Those who listen to wisdom, in the streets, will be blessed. There is still much life: a stubborn, joyous, even surprising life. And with it comes resilient hope...there are still moments when we turn to our neighbour and say, 'Surely God is in this place.'<sup>iii</sup>

We need to work at this. If we are not simply to survive, but to thrive, we must continue to do many of the things we are doing to ensure that wisdom and faith and hope and love are not only

heard but seen and felt in our streets. By what we are saying and what we are doing, we enable people to encounter God. We remain resolute in the belief that whilst we may not always be successful, we are still faithful.

The writer Anne Lamott tells the story of being raised a devout atheist, but also tells of her frequent backsliding into faith: 'even when I was a child I knew that when I said Hello, someone heard.' Neil Glover says this need for divine presence in our streets is further heightened in a secular age which has attempted its radical disenchantment around belief and found the world still haunted. It has bolted the doors of its reality, the gods have been banished, and yet something mysterious still moves outside the window. God will always make God's presence known beyond the bounds of the Church, but that does not diminish the Church's calling to embody the presence. The need is particularly urgent because as disenchantment draws nearer to its seeming completion, its incompleteness becomes all the more apparent, and so too does the Church's vocation: to become agents of re-enchantment in a disenchanted age.<sup>iv</sup>

This speaks truth about the hugely difficult age we live in. Not one of active persecution of faith and the Church, but of active apathy towards believing and belonging because in a world of individualism and reduced commitment, believing and belonging ask a lot. Do we water down what we believe, the radical calls for justice and peace and hope and loving engagement with all the messiness of our world, and think we might attract people by a Christianity-light brand? Or do we stand by what we believe, as Jesus said, taking up our crosses and following Him, and having the conviction of our faith? Not aggressive and belligerent, but persistently faithful, and gently determined that the practical loving-kindness at the heart of who we are as Christians will still make a difference in a culture that may be deaf to Wisdom, but is still attracted by the steady presence we offer with doors open each week. And at Christmas and Easter, Remembrance and

Harvest, when people come off the streets because they have felt something, heard something, and aware that that something is missing from their lives.

Why do we still do what we do? Because it matters. Why won't the Wisdom of God let us go? Because the worship we engage in, and the acts of kindness and charity we perform, and the hospitality we offer continues to speak into the streets of our community, which would be the poorer if we were not around. You, the faithful wise women and men of this faith community, listen for Wisdom's still, small voice, and hang on to your belief because you can see the difference putting it into practice, in big ways and small ways, still makes.

In an insecure world, this Wisdom is grounded in the voice and practise of God, heard and seen on the streets of our community. It calls us to be in whatever way we can the lived-out presence of God today. Woven together our Christian actions form a way of life. Even when the earth is shaking, even when the world is deafened by fear and anger and hurt and suspicion, we can borrow the words and actions of God's Wisdom and bring something needed to this world. Love in action. Love in our streets and communities. Love in our homes. Love inside the Church. And love outside this Church. Where Wisdom still calls in the streets, and we are called to be streetwise.

*Street-wise – adjective:* Having the shrewd awareness, experience, and resourcefulness needed for survival in a difficult, often dangerous urban environment. Having the necessary knack, personality and instinct for survival in rough, urban environments. What does that look like for Christians as individuals and as communities? When we face the cold secular winds of decline and uncertainty, we are called to inhabit that beautiful Irish proverb, 'It is in the shelter of each other that we live.'<sup>v</sup> We do not need heroes, we need hosts, listening to and acting with God's wisdom. The profound change we need requires strong community, in the Church and on the streets.

Wisdom shows up, calling to us, walking in our streets and in our churches, pleading, promising, predicting. Seeking the good of each and the good of all.

Take her words to heart; keep going.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> *Kenneth H Carter Jr, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 4, p50*

<sup>ii</sup> *In Neil Glover, Finding our Voice, pps 8-9*

<sup>iii</sup> *ibid, p9*

<sup>iv</sup> *ibid p15*

<sup>v</sup> *ibid p87*