

## Walking and wisdom

## Ephesians 5.15-20

Sometimes translations which can seem very clear actually miss something of the author's original intentions. So our reading from Ephesians today began 'Be careful how you live.' And that is a perfectly good summary of what he goes on to recommend in the way they should behave, although some of the detail of what that means which we read later on in this chapter and the next seems counter-cultural today – the advice to master and slaves for example. But if we look at the word translated 'live' the Greek word is actually 'walk.' And that is a word which occurs several times in this Epistle. I am altering the text back to the 'walk' of the original.

2.2. You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked.

4.1 Walk a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called

4.17 You must no longer walk as the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their minds

5.8 Walk as children of light

There used to be a delightful way of talking about a couple who were dating (and even that is a dated expression these days) – people would say that John and Joan were 'walking out.' They were seen to be a couple – to be special to each other. Isn't that a good way of talking about our relationship with God in Christ – that we are 'walking out' with him? We will sing about that in our Offertory hymn by William Cowper – 'O for a closer walk with God.' and in our final hymn when we think about our life as a journey, but one shared with God every step of the way. 'And it's from the old I travel to the new, keep me travelling along with you.'

At the beginning of Chapter 5 we read 'Walk in love, as Christ loved us.' The way we live should be in harmony with our understanding of God's love for us in Christ. That doesn't tie us down to one narrow understanding of specific behaviours, but to applying our minds to what reflecting what God has shown us he is like in Jesus might be in the way we think and talk and act. I will come on to the wisdom he says is needed for that in a moment or two. But just let your minds ponder what walking with someone implies. It means sharing what is on our minds, getting to know each other better, enjoying each other's company, and being headed in the same direction. There are many ways we might walk with Christ, and we have to discover what are the most helpful for us as individuals. That is being 'careful' as our Epistle says. It will take some effort on our part. Living

life hand-in-hand with God is what we are called to do. And we are called to get on with it – ‘making the most of the time’ . We sang about that in our first hymn ‘live this day as if thy last.’

So what do we make about this business of being wise? We could start with the old saying that some people are wise, and some are otherwise. There is an interesting hierarchy of words. We might acquire ‘data’ about something – the raw materials of facts. Or a step upwards might be getting ‘information’ – which implies that someone else has processed the data before handing it on. The next step up would be ‘knowledge’ – implying that we have enough information to have confidence about whatever it is. And the final level would be ‘wisdom’.

Someone did a survey of college prospectuses in the States over the last 100 years. In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century they offered prospective students the chance to get wisdom, by the mid century they were talking of knowledge, and by the end of the century it was only information. I wonder if they will descend to just providing data soon.

But although I called it a hierarchy, it doesn’t follow that you have to start with the lowest level and progress to the highest. People can be incredibly *knowledgable* and yet not be very *wise*. But I am sure you can think of people, as I can, who are incredibly wise, but not very well educated, but who are not particularly knowledgeable.

Wisdom comes from the way we use the data, the information, the knowledge that we have. Some people have argued that you can’t learn wisdom, that it is simply a gift from God. The opening of Chapter 2 of Proverbs says: ‘It is the Lord who gives wisdom’.

And maybe it is not only a hierarchy, but also a circle. It is like that circle of competence. We move from unconscious incompetence to conscious incompetence, then hopefully on to conscious competence. and finally unconscious competence. The same could be said of moving from unconscious foolishness to conscious foolishness, and on to conscious wisdom and finally unconscious wisdom. There is the story of the teenager who sat next to a famous astronomer at a dinner party. She asked what he did, and he told her he studied astronomy. ‘Wow – I finished doing astronomy last year.’ she said. The wise wear their knowledge lightly. A great Russian Rabbi said ‘There is a very high rung which only one man in a whole generation can reach: that of having learned all secret wisdom, and then praying like a little child.’ We may not reach that rung – but we can pray for wisdom to use whatever data and information and knowledge we have well.

The Christians in Ephesus had people around them who claimed to be wise – I have mentioned them before. They were called Gnostics – which literally means ‘people who know’. But that was human wisdom, if it was wisdom at all. What Christianity offered them was a different take on that, and it is what our faith still offers to us today. We can seek knowledge, and that isn’t a bad thing to

do. But what is infinitely better is to seek wisdom. One way of doing that is finding people who already have some degree of wisdom and learning from them. An ancient oriental saying puts it well: 'Who knows not, and knows not that he knows not, is foolish - shun him. Who knows not, and knows that he knows not, is humble - teach him. Who knows, and knows not that he knows, is asleep - wake him. Who knows and knows that he knows, is wise - follow him. And that is what we Christians do: we follow Christ, As Paul wrote to the Corinthians 'to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the Wisdom of God.'