

Bible Study – Session 4
Cosmos Sunday



THE WISDOM BEHIND THE WORLD

Earth Reading – Proverbs 8.22-31

The Beginning

The image shown above is by an Indigenous Australian seeking to express how the Creator Spirit, also known as the Rainbow Spirit, separates the components of the cosmos, by separating light from darkness, one system from many systems. Behind the universe among many Indigenous peoples, there is a deep spiritual impulse that governs the cosmos in wondrous ways.

The Hubble space telescope continues to discover images from the distant reaches of the cosmos that amaze and fascinate both artists and scientists. Recently the Spitzer telescope snapped a picture that looked like ‘two icy blues eyes peering through an elaborate, swirling red mask’. Another image looked like ‘an offensive finger’ suggesting that ‘God is left-handed’ (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, May 13-14, 2006) The patterns and possibilities in the gallery of these galaxies is endless, partly dependent on the imagination of humans but even more on the imagination of God.

Discuss: What kind of God do you discern when you peer into the distant galaxies of the cosmos? Earth may be but a speck of stardust in the cosmos, but are the myriad of mysteries in the smallest life-form on Earth any less staggering? Where is God in this world of amazing worlds?

Background

To appreciate the unique image portrayed in the Earth reading for this study, we need to recognise that this text seems to provide a kind of charter for many Old Testament passages about wisdom that we have discussed in the previous studies. Basically there are four types of wisdom in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament:

- a) teachings about how to live with God in society handed down by the wise, often called fathers, from one generation to the next (eg., Prov. 5.1-2),
- b) instructive insights about life and the natural world gained by close observation of nature and society (eg., Prov. 6.6)
- c) the way or code that is innate in each component of both animate and inanimate creation that governs their essential nature (eg., Job 29.36)
- d) a presence or partner that existed prior to, and accompanied, the creation process from the beginning (Prov. 8.22-31).

It is the fourth of these understandings of wisdom, the wisdom charter, that we explore in this Bible study.

Discuss: Explore ways in which you in your life have sought to acquire wisdom? Are the categories outlined above helpful? How is God the ultimate source of all such wisdom? Do we humans have an innate capacity to pursue wisdom?

EXPLORING THE TEXT

Read Proverbs 8.22-23

There is some debate among scholars as to the precise translation of this passage. After years of analysis, I would argue that the best—and most literal—rendering of 8.2 is:

YHWH acquired me in the beginning,
his Way before his works.

The person speaking is Woman Wisdom. She is claiming that before God created anything, before the creation of the cosmos, she was there. Just as wise humans are expected to ‘acquire’ wisdom, God ‘acquired’ wisdom before anything else. God acquired wisdom as the first stage in the creation process. Wisdom was and continues to be a primal force in the origins and operations of the cosmos.

The second key concept in this verse is that Woman Wisdom is God’s way, a way that preceded God’s creative works. As we have noted in earlier Bible studies, the way of something is that distinctive impulse or code that governs the character and function of a given part of creation. Here wisdom is identified as the essential factor that governs God’s work as a creator. Wisdom guides God in all God’s creating, from the very beginning. Creating is not an arbitrary act, but determined by wisdom.

Discuss: How do you react to the claim of Wisdom that she is the first thing that God acquired, even before God began creating? Wisdom is not an attribute of God here, but a primal partner with God. Does this seem reasonable to you? Does it seem contrary to the evidence of science? How might you understand it?

Read Proverbs 8.24-29

In these verses Woman Wisdom describes a number of the domains of creation. She claims to have been present prior to their coming into existence. She was there before the great watery deeps appeared, before the mountains took shape, before the skies had any structure and before foundations of Earth were established.

What is implied by Wisdom's claim that she was present before the creation of these domains? That she saw how they came into being and hence understands their nature? Perhaps! I suggest, however, in the light of related wisdom texts that two specific implications can be identified.

First, wisdom is not only an observer but an agent of God in the creation process. Proverbs 3.19-20 makes it clear that it is 'by wisdom' that God created the cosmos. Wisdom is the partner, power and eternal guide for God in the creation of the world.

Second, since wisdom is a guiding force in creating the domains of the cosmos, evidence of wisdom can be discerned in those domains. To speak of each domain having its own 'way' or inner code that determines its character, is to recognise an expression of primal wisdom in every component of creation, however vast or minute. Wisdom imparts wisdom to all realms of creation so that they function according to an ultimate design for parts of creation.

Discuss: If each component of creation has its inherent way implanted by wisdom, how might we discern that wisdom in things? Are scientists ultimately exploring the endless 'ways' of wisdom inherent in the universe, whether they happen to be the genes or the galaxies of our world?

Read Proverbs 8.30-31

Woman Wisdom closes with a delightful portrait of her relationship with God. She says that she was by God's side all the way through creating the cosmos and that she excited God throughout the creation process. Wisdom is more than clinical artisan at God's side; she is a partner that causes God to rejoice and celebrate in all of creation, including the human race.

This celebration is a two way event. Wisdom turn God on, as it were, through the wonders of creation and she, in turn, rejoices 'before him' continuously. So when God sees the 'ways' of wisdom in creation, God not only says 'very good' but 'hallelujah!' We too are able to celebrate with creation, with the presence of Wisdom in creation and with a God who rejoices in creation.

One question remains. A key but rare word in verse 30 is debated. Should it be translated 'like a master craftsman' or 'a little child' or 'the faithful one'? Or is this a case of double entendre? The rendering 'craftsman' seems to fit the idea that Wisdom was a designer with God in crafting the cosmos. The translation, 'little child', however, is compatible with the idea that God is excited and celebrates, as one would with an infant that God loves. The concept that wisdom is the 'faithful' partner of God in the continuing task of creating our world also has appeal.

Note how Psalm 148 takes this celebration a step further and invites every domain of the cosmos to praise God, everything from supernova to snowflakes. All the cosmos is invited to join God in shouting 'halleluja!' Why? Because God commanded and they were created (v. 8), or in the image of Proverbs 8, because God created all things through Wisdom, with whom God rejoices daily.

Discuss: How might we reflect the truth that both Wisdom and the Creator rejoice and celebrate the wonders of creation? Where might we discern this rejoicing in the world around us? Have the destructive ways and lifestyles of humans tended to remove us from nature and hence reduced our awareness of a celebrating Creator accompanied by Wisdom?

CONSCIOUS OF THE CRISIS

It could be argued that this reading from Proverbs 8 supports the current theory of Intelligent Design which argues that from inexplicable dimensions in the design of the cosmos we can argue for the existence of God as the only possible explanation for such realities.

Proverbs 8 works just the opposite way. It takes for granted a God and a partner who is Wisdom, a dimension even greater than an intelligent design in creation. And the wise person is not concerned with arguing that God exists, but with discovering the wondrous 'ways' of wisdom in every component of the cosmos and the rejoicing presence of the Creator in, with and under those components.

More important than exercising the human mind about the existence of God, is facing the reality of the human will that treats creation as property, domains to be dominated and exploited. We have devalued God's creation and, by our folly we have violated the wisdom inherent in the ways of creation. And that folly extends to almost every domain on planet Earth.

Discuss: Outline ways in which our folly has negated the very wisdom God employed in creating the ecosystems of this planet? Are there ways in which we can return again to explore our planet and discern its ways, the wisdom in our environment that we can acquire once again to help redeem our wounded world?

THE CHRIST CONNECTION

Read Colossians 1.15-20

This reading from Colossians is very dense, intense and profound. Christ is here portrayed as the cosmic power through whom all things visible and invisible were

created. Christ is the cosmic one who is not only before all things but the one who is the unifying impulse in all creation. In other words, the Wisdom spoken of in Proverbs is here identified with the cosmic Christ, the agent and ordering force in all things. 'All things', by the way, is an ancient Greek expression for the entire cosmos.

What is revealed in this epistle, however, is that the cosmic Christ is not only Wisdom, the primal agent and architect of creation. Christ is also the one who plays another role in the cosmic order.

Christ is that eternal force working now to 'reconcile all things' to God. Where there are forces that have brought alienation to the created order, Christ is the impulse to bring healing and unity. Christ is not only the one who brings healing and reconciliation between humans and God, but between all creation and God. The cross of Jesus Christ is more than an act through which God redeems humans. The cross signals the process of God redeeming all creation. Such a message is truly worth celebrating.

Discuss: If Christ is indeed the force at work in the healing of creation, where might we see that healing happening? Are we as servants of Christ called to work with Christ in healing a wounded and alienated creation? Are the ugly wounds caused by global warming and similar evils also the concern of the cosmic Christ suffering with creation? What are we called to do as Christians who have an awareness of how Christ works in us and our cosmos?

CLOSING WITH PRAISE

Participants may wish to close by singing the following verses of Hymn 16 from *Habel Hymns Volume One*. The melody is *Amazing Grace*.

THE COSMIC CHRIST

1. Amazing is the Christ who died
To void all sin and curse,
Just as amazing is his life
That fills the universe.
3. The hidden Christ sustains for us
The blueprint of the skies,
The wisdom in each fragile form,
The soul that lights the eyes.
4. The cosmic Christ moves deep below
To heal the wounds within,
When all creation groans in pain
Because of human sin.
5. The cosmos hails the Christ, the One
Who reconciles all things,
'Til all creation rises new
With healing in her wings.

PRAYER

*May the cosmic Christ whose healing presence
fills the universe and works to reconcile all things,
help us to discern the presence of Wisdom in creation,
to celebrate her wondrous impulses
and to discover the ways she reveals
for us to be agents of Christ in healing our planet. Amen*