

# Epworth review

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# In Search of Wisdom\*

JAMES DUNN

'Where is the Life we have lost in living?  
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?  
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?'

(T. S. Eliot, *Choruses from The Rock 1*)

INFORMATION is one of the key words of today. The information available to us is increasing exponentially. We are being overwhelmed by demands for information. The abbreviation 'IT', 'Information Technology', peppers our documentation. We access Internet and surf in cyberspace. The information superhighway is opening up before us. A stranger might well be tempted to think that information is the business of the university. And certainly IT allows us to process and manipulate information in ways undreamed of even ten years ago. In fact we need increasingly sophisticated IT simply to cope with information and certainly to process it. But IT also allows us a kind of cheap and easy scholarship, where a search programme on CD-ROM gives us at our finger tips an apparent mastery of text and data that in former generations took decades of learning and study to achieve. The processing of information can itself become a kind of pseudo-scholarship. So we ask with Eliot, 'Are we losing knowledge in information?'

Such information is, of course, only a means to a greater end, the real business of the university. That is, knowledge – the advancement of knowledge through research, the transmission of knowledge through teaching, the preservation of knowledge in libraries, the diffusion of knowledge through publications. And knowledge is more than information. Knowledge is a deep and personal acquaintance with a subject which still does require sustained and dedicated application.

Yet poets and scripture both remind us that knowledge too can be a mixed blessing. Knowledge can corrupt as well as edify. Knowledge is power, says Bacon; knowledge makes one as a god, says Keats; knowledge makes one proud, says Cowper; knowledge puffs up, says Paul; knowledge can make one intolerant and manipulative; knowledge can be gained at the expense of virtue and at the cost of integrity, warn Housman and Johnson. Or knowledge can dry up a mind in desiccated pedantry, like that of Edward Casaubon in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. As Newman noted, one can be possessed by one's knowledge, not possessed of it. So we ask also, in Eliot's words, Are we losing knowledge in information; are we losing wisdom in knowledge?

For there is a higher good than information and knowledge. And that is Wisdom – the chief theme of our meditation. Above all, urges the Solomon of the book of Proverbs, in summarising the already age-old wisdom of experience, 'Get Wisdom; get insight', and urges repeatedly (Prov. 4:5, 7). What then is this wisdom which is more valuable than knowledge, more precious than rubies (Prov. 3:15; 8:11)? In our reading from 1 Corinthians, chapter 1, the apostle Paul speaks of at least three kinds of wisdom.

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## 1. The wisdom of clever speech

‘For Christ did not send me to baptise but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power’ (1 Cor. 1:17). ‘When I came to you, brothers, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words of wisdom . . . My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God’ (1 Cor. 2:1, 4-5).

In these references to words of wisdom Paul was referring, of course, to the business of rhetoric – the skill of effective speech, of persuasive argument, or, more coldly, speaking reduced to a method. In the ancient world rhetoric was a principal feature of good education. We still have the handbooks, categories and distinctions between forensic, deliberative and epideictic oratory – terminology which is making a comeback in literary criticism today. And would that we and our public speakers had better training in such skills today. Paul himself shows no little skill in his own use of rhetoric, the art of persuasion, as, for example, he pleads with the Corinthians to speak the language of responsibility rather than that of rights, the language of love rather than the language of liberty (particularly 1 Cor. 8-10). And yet Paul seems to play down this wisdom. Why?

The danger is that rhetoric becomes *mere* rhetoric – a danger widely perceived in the classical world. We hear it echoed in the negative overtone which still clings to the word itself, with its implication of insincerity or exaggeration. Or in the related term ‘sophist’ – primarily a teacher of rhetoric, but with the secondary meaning of ‘fallacious reasoner, quibbler’, one who delights in argument for argument’s sake.

We know the danger well. We live in a society where the ancient art of rhetoric has been overtaken by the science of advertising, by the effectiveness of the sound byte, where the medium has become the message, where the Sunday morning breakfast interview becomes the main news item for the rest of the day. Here indeed wisdom is in danger of being lost in knowledge, knowledge lost in information, and even information itself sacrificed to the imperative of audience ratings and the latest sales figures.

We know it too in our own circles. The students who on interview can impress with ‘the gift of the gab’, but who soon reveal that ‘it’s all in the packaging’. There are even academics and disciplines which see the way to establish themselves and to maintain their distinctiveness by creating a new language, with its own new technical terms to bemuse, bewilder and impress, spending much effort to translate old problems into the new language, even if the answers to these problems still remain elusive. They generate a literature and can then talk among themselves happily and endlessly, learned article begetting learned article, with the question whether they are communicating outside their discipline, or adding to the sum of knowledge, let alone of wisdom, very much a secondary issue.

And students learn the trick and become rhetoricians, sophists in turn. I recall back in the ‘60s, students at Cambridge accepting a challenge to talk technical jargon all the way to London – at that time, one and a half hours by train. And they succeeded!

But this is not wisdom. Sophism is not sophia. Clever speech designed primarily to impress is not what we are in business for, is it?

## **2. Wisdom according to the world's standards**

'Consider your own call, brothers: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth' (1 Cor. 1:26). In his talk of the wisdom of the world, we know who Paul had in mind – the wise, the powerful, those of noble birth. We know that there was a minority in the Corinthian church who belonged to the social élite – those of higher social status, the well educated, those who held positions of political power, able to command respect because of their family or wealth, able to act in their own interests, without reference to others – whether in matters of sexual ethics (1 Cor. 5), or in undertaking litigation, which only those with wealth could afford (1 Cor. 6), or at the common meal where the well-to-do dined well in disregard for the poorer members who went hungry (1 Cor. 11). In a society structured on patron/client relationships, manipulation by the powerful, and abuse of patronage were inescapable. It is in such a context that we find the wisdom of the world.

We know it well: wisdom reckoned in terms of success (financial, of course); wisdom reckoned in terms of power (over others, naturally); wisdom reckoned in terms of 'getting on' in life. It is a wisdom contained in many books, particularly those you often now find in airport bookshops, with titles like *How to Succeed, How to Make your First Million* – a wisdom now symbolised in the ghostly finger pointing from heaven and the voice saying, 'It's you!'. The philosophy has entered some strands of Christianity – the so-called 'prosperity gospel'. All this, even though we are well aware that there is no necessary correlation between prosperity and goodness, between prosperity and wisdom. And if we were not, then regular reports of breakdowns, suicides, and recourse to psychiatric counselling on the part of the 'successful' should be a sufficient reminder.

This was a danger which C. S. Lewis warned against in a lecture he gave to Cambridge graduands, entitled 'The Inner Circle'. In this lecture he warned those about to embark on their careers that wherever they went they would always find in the office, in the staff room, on the factory floor 'an inner circle', the 'in' group, those 'in the know' – a group who were in effect the brokers of social patronage, the determiners of acceptability, even the definers of the magic term 'success'. And sooner or later, usually sooner, the desire would arise within the newcomer to join that inner circle, to be 'in', to be counted 'one of us' – a seductive enticement, and oh, so attractive to the one conscious of being outside that circle, left in the cold. But, and this is Lewis's point, access to that inner circle can usually only be gained at considerable cost – the cost of repeated little compromises of beliefs and principles, successive salami slices of personal integrity, a cost too high.

Of course we know that there is something false in such wisdom of the world. Of course we want the higher wisdom. But the higher wisdom seems to be in short supply. We have experienced the bankruptcy of too many ideologies. The left is in painful reconstruction. The golden dawn of '89 is already obscured in the United States and in much of Europe by the darkening clouds of international scepticism and unilateralism. The values at the heart of university education are coming under increasing challenge from the forces of nationalism and fundamentalism, still steadily gathering in strength even as we speak. In our own country the Thatcherist confidence of the '80s has ebbed and political

commentators confess with a shake of the head that we simply do not know how to integrate the power of the market and the need for social cohesion.

In the universities themselves we have to devote so much energy to second-guessing Government policy, constantly readjusting to shifted goal posts, that we seem to have no time to redefine our vision of the university, to restate or reform Newman's *Idea of a University*, which has been a starting point and sounding board for most visions of the university for more than one hundred years. In the past twenty years we have experienced successively tensions over tenure and academic freedom, despair at the stripping out of 'small departments', the Gadarene rush into modularisation and semesterisation, the angst over student funding. Where is the vision, where is the higher wisdom in this? How much would be better described as the wisdom of the world? Of course in all this there have been several good things – particularly the increased access and participation rates. But how one longs for a perspective beyond short-termism, for a wisdom that is not simply reactive, for a wisdom that looks less like the wisdom of the world. We look for another Newman to present *The Idea of a University* for a new century, for another Moberly to address *The Crisis of the University* fifty years on.

### 3. The Wisdom of God

But there is a third kind of wisdom – a hidden wisdom. Paul here draws on a religious insight already millenia old. The recognition in the best thinkers and sages that there is something deeper than the wisdom of clever speech, something more than the wisdom of the world. There is a wisdom which underlies visible reality, which makes sense of the world, which explains the rhythm and intricate beauty of creation. But it is hidden, not easily accessible, not to be found on the surface of things.

Job 28 contains one of the most beautiful and powerful expositions of this insight. It describes how miners can burrow to the depths of the earth, undergoing fearful hazards, in order to attain gold and precious stones. But who can find the way to wisdom. Who knows where wisdom is to be found? The deep says, 'It is not in me'; the sea says, 'It is not with me'. No price can be paid for it. Abaddon and Death say, 'We have heard a rumour of it'. Only God understands the way to it. Only God knows its place. There is a deeper resource to inspire the vision, to counter the forces which turn us in upon ourselves, to feed the springs of altruism.

Israel was convinced that they had been given the secret: God's wisdom was to be found in the law, the Torah.

Who has gone up into heaven, and taken her,  
and brought her down from the clouds?  
Who has gone over the sea, and found her,  
and will buy her for pure gold?  
No one knows the way to her,  
or is concerned about the path to her.  
But the one who knows all things knows her,  
he found her by his understanding . . .  
This is our God;  
no other can be compared to him.  
He found the whole way to knowledge,  
and gave her to his servant Jacob

and to Israel, whom he loved.  
Afterward she appeared on earth  
and lived with humankind.  
She is the book of the commandments of God,  
the law that endures forever.

(Baruch 3:29-32a, 35-41)

This is the wisdom of inspiration, the wisdom of insight, not to be taught even by the best teacher. It is a wisdom given by God, not to be discovered by human search. Of course, this was a blatantly evangelistic appeal on the part of the Jewish Wisdom writers: to those concerned to find and know this deeper wisdom, they cried out, 'Here is the wisdom you seek; we have it in the law, in our Torah.' And that is a conviction which Christians share; that is why we still count the Old Testament as part of our scriptures; that is why we spend so much time studying it.

But now Christians have found a new measure, a new embodiment of wisdom – Jesus. 'He (God) is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God' (1 Cor. 1:30). The wisdom of God is not to be measured by sophistication of speech – otherwise not many Christian preachers would qualify; in his own estimation Paul himself did not qualify. The wisdom is measured rather by the power of conviction, the word spoken in the power of the Spirit, which despite rhetorical flaws speaks to the heart. 'My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God' (1 Cor. 2:4-5). A wisdom, in other words, which discovers ourselves to ourselves, which brings us self-knowledge and self-understanding, a wisdom which causes us to see ourselves not as we like to portray ourselves, but as we are, as others see us, as God sees us.

And this wisdom is not to be measured by worldly success; otherwise all Christian ministry is foolish. It is measured rather by a very different yardstick – the cross. 'For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength' (1 Cor. 1:22-25). In a day when we have all been choosing and changing our corporate logos, what a logo, what an icon to choose – the cross of shame! How much better, surely, the photo of an articulate student, or proof of the high earning potential of our successful alumni. But the cross! Foolishness! Yes, foolishness indeed!

The foolishness summed up in such sayings as: 'No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends' (John 15:13); 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you' (Matt. 5:44); 'The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45); and 'Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us' (Matt. 6:12). That is the wisdom of the cross, a wisdom which means the transformation of all human wisdom, the transformation of all human values, but without which there can be little hope of real community, whether in a church, or a university, or a nation.

This is the wisdom we seek above all to find, above all to be given.

I began with words from T. S. Eliot, so it is appropriate that we end with other words which he wrote, from *The Four Quartets*:

'The only wisdom we can hope to acquire  
Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless'

(‘East Coker’, *Four Quartets*).

