

PROVERBS 1:1-7
AN ART OF LIVING

St Kilda is one of the places we saw on holiday! Well, we saw it in the distance, a faint blue rock through the camera viewfinder, and the binoculars; but it was St Kilda, we could identify it! We had a chance meeting with friends as we sailed to the Western Isles and one of their hopes was to visit St Kilda last week; they'd booked places and were waiting for confirmation - which day would they get to go? It would depend on all sorts of factors. Eventually, they went on the Thursday, and travelled 40 miles out into the North Atlantic to visit these most remote islands! How do you find your way to St Kilda? It is one of the most remote places round the UK. The day on which they went was a beautiful sunny day, the day on which we could see the islands from the shore. The sea was fairly calm and they could probably see where they were going from the first minute. But there are days when people try to find St Kilda and they can hardly see it even if they are right next to it, with low cloud, rain, and storms; how then to steer their way to St Kilda, to guide their boat? They would need maps and charts and a compass! Steering the boat then becomes an art, done by a skilled pilot.

Everyone is trying to steer their way through life, in one way or another. No matter who we are or where we live or the way in which we phrase the questions, we are all looking to find a way to live life well, to live a good and happy life. Very few people are completely careless about this. Sometimes it is easy and straightforward: the questions are simple and easily-answered, the choices are clear, good and fair and so we motor on through life, getting on as best we can. But there are other times when the way to steer is far from clear and the questions are far harder; we're not sure that we know the answers or that we like the answers; the choices are more complicated, they have consequences and we're not sure what these consequences will be. Then we're not sure which way to steer. How do we find the way? What would be the equivalent for you, of the map, chart and compass? What would these be for you? For your family? For your friends?

Wisdom - "an art of steering, the art of piloting oneself through the confusion of life." (Von Rad) What a great picture! There is a way we can find of steering ourselves through life, in good days and in difficult days, in the days when it is *"Summertime and the living is easy, the fish are jumping and the cotton is high"*; but there are times when it seems as if it is permanent winter of the soul and we don't know where to turn next. How then do we steer? Where then do we find wisdom? What then becomes our map, chart and compass? Wisdom is "an art for living"; I like that quote because it lets me see from the start that there are not set ways, no easy answers, but there is something, an art, for us to learn, something for us to discern, something for us to grasp. A retired minister whom I know a little bit wrote recently that he reads a verse from Proverbs every day because there is always something to learn, something to mull over, a new piece of the art of living to learn.

Proverbs is a fascinating book. It is not the easiest book in the Bible to get your head round, but it is full of treasure for anyone prepared to mine its pages. Every verse has something to offer; there is not always a rhyme or reason to the order of the verses and perhaps that's what we find hard. One minute we're talking about clothes, the next about weights and measures, the next about relationships, but it is full of all kinds of things about the art of living. Sometimes its wisdom is thought-provoking, sometimes it gets under our skin by the wit of the picture it paints, sometimes it teases the reader by these same pictures, sometimes these are symbolic pictures and we have to think about them; always, there is a great deal of common sense. Altogether, here is an art of living, the art of steering through life, something for us to

mull over and learn from, something precious and important. Bible wisdom becomes our map, chart and compass through the confusion of life!

Proverbs 1:1-7 sets the scene for what the book contains. The book is attributed to Solomon and whether he wrote them all or simply collected them, we'll never know. It is safe to say that he was famous for his wisdom: people came from hundreds of miles around to hear what he had to say. There are some big life-words in the introduction: wisdom, insight, prudence, right, just, fair, knowledge, discretion, learning, guidance (steering!) understanding, discipline. If you were to ask anyone on the planet what they hope for and aspire to in life, so often at least one of these words would be there. These are qualities people at our best aspire to; we want to make right choices, live in good ways; we want to understand some of the deeper things of life; we want to be wise; we want our world to be a just and fair place for everyone. These are the qualities we aspire to be at our best as human beings and they are all here in Proverbs!

When I was leaving school, the sixth year pupils all availed ourselves of autograph books and we went round, the pupils signing each other's books; we also involved members of staff and some were daft enough to do it! Most simply signed their name, but one was brave enough to write a little rhyme which you may well know: "A wise old bird lived in an oak, the more he saw the less he spoke, the less he spoke the more he heard; why can't we be like that wise old bird?" There are lots of days when I wish I'd listened more closely to that advice. *"The wise..." (Proverbs 1:5)* Listening is something for us to learn. Do you know the answer to everything? Some people give impression that they do! If we don't know the answer to everything, how do you learn something new? Wisdom's answer is listening! We listen to the Bible and what it teaches; we listen to other Christians and to their experience of life; we listen for the promptings and stirrings of the Spirit, acting on our conscience; as we listen, so God speaks to us and we learn what it is to be wise. We are never too old to listen, to listen for God, to listen to one another, to listen to other people in all sorts of places; if we were better at listening, some of our troubles would never arise!

Some of Proverbs is quite detailed and we might come back to some of that next week, but chapter 3 is big-picture stuff. Here are foundation-qualities; here are "What-kind-of-person-do-you-want-to-be?" questions. *"Let love..." (Proverbs 3:3)* I'm sure you never did this when you were young, carved your initials on the bark of a tree; maybe you did it with your first love and put a heart round them? Chances are, if the tree is still standing and not killed off by people carving their initials, that they might still be there 10, 50 years later! That's the picture: carve these qualities into your heart so that they will stay there for ever; let them be part of your life forever, part of the very fabric of your being. "Love and faithfulness" really mean fairly similar things: the word for 'love' here is better understood as loyalty; it is the word the Old Testament uses for God's covenant love, His commitment to be loyal to His people. So, loyalty and faithfulness are to be the qualities of our lives and with these qualities, life will be blessed - *"Then you..." (Proverbs 3:4)* Now, it doesn't tell us to whom we are to be loyal and faithful - that's beauty of Proverbs because then you have to ask yourself the question - to whom am I to be loyal? I'm to be loyal to the people that I say I love; loyal to my wife or your husband, to family, to friends, to Church and fellow-Xns, loyal to Jesus because He is Lord of life; loyal to your employer, to the people we work beside, loyal to our commitments. Loyalty is a quality of life, and people trust us. We live in a world where loyalty is not always the quality by which people live; "me-first" is many people's mantra and we will live life any way we please to get our own way! Sometimes even Christians display that kind of me-first spirit. The result? Relationships fall apart; churches fall apart; Christian faith is something to take or disregard as the mood takes us. Yet, it is a most precious thing, this quality

of loyalty; it is not the easiest and at times our loyalty is tried most severely, but it is a beautiful thing to see. I see it in some of you, loyal to people in the most trying of circumstances and it is a most beautiful quality to see.

"Trust in..." (Proverbs 3:5f) The art of living life, the art of steering our way through life, has a place for God. This is not to be assumed. Not even in Church people is that to be assumed; we can have a place for Church, but not for God! Many people would appear to have no place for God at all and an art of living that has no place for God, no place for faith. Wise living, according to the Proverbs, learns to trust God and learns to lean on God. Imagine yourself lying helplessly face-down on the floor; where do you find support? That's the picture Proverbs paints here and then tells us that we find our support with God. Learning to trust God doesn't always come easy to us; we want to be self-sufficient; we want to think that we know all of the answers to life's questions in ourselves, but the art of wise living tells us that learning to trust God is the best foundation for a good life that we can find. It is striking how hard we find it to acknowledge God's place in our life: we trust to luck, or to superstition (fingers crossed, we say!), or to our own wits and strength ('I can manage on my own; I don't need anyone to help me (including God!)'). If that picture of lying face-down on the floor, helpless, is the picture that describes your life, then find your support in the living God and trust Him to lift you up! The Lord is worthy of our trust!

Loyalty and trust are two big qualities of life; they are both counter-intuitive to human nature; neither of them comes naturally to us; both have to be learned. We have to learn to be loyal, and so often learn by our mistakes, when we let someone down. We have to learn to trust God: again we don't always get it right, but we learn to acknowledge the Lord, that He provides, that He guides and leads, and that our times are in His hands and there is no better place. These are big markers for the art of steering: does this choice allow me to be loyal to the Lord, or to other people? Does this choice help me to trust the Lord and acknowledge Him? This is the art of steering and these markers are always there; these markers help us every day of our lives. Wisdom is an art of living, something to learn, something to discover, something new every day. We learn when we listen to the Bible, to one another, to the Spirit.

Jesus told a story of two men, one He called wise, the other foolish. Each man built a house: the wise man built His house on the rock; the foolish man built his on sand. Under pressure, the wise man's house stood firm, but the foolish man's house fell flat. What was the difference between the wise and foolish men? *"everyone who..." (Matthew 7:24, 26)* The bottom line: this is what we are to be and do. We are to be loyal: carve the word 'loyal' into your heart, like your initials in the oak tree! Be loyal to the Lord, to your family, your friends, your church, your promises, your commitments. Trust the Lord and acknowledge Him: let the Lord have His place in our lives, the One who supports us when we are helpless; the One who guides and leads us; the One who loves us endlessly. We can sit and listen to sermons and be inspired by fine words; we can sit here and agree that the Bible is right and this is the kind of people we should be and by the time we get home the notion has worn off and we do nothing about it; then we steer through life by a different map! Wisdom: an art of steering through the confusion of life. Let the Bible be the map, chart and compass for you; be loyal, trust the Lord with all your heart!