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It's 'back to school time' this morning. You probably think that there are still a couple of weeks to go, particularly if you are one of the people who will actually go back. But no, we're there already. This morning's first reading was an extract from a school textbook.

The Old Testament contains several different types of book. I'm sure you're familiar with the 'Law' and the 'Prophets', and probably also with the historical books (such as Kings and Chronicles). There's a more general category as well, called 'Writings', which is a sort of taxonomic bucket for the books that don't really fit anywhere else, and a subsection of this is the Wisdom literature. Of the five books in this category (two of which are in the Apocrypha), Proverbs is the oldest, at least in the sense that it contains the oldest material. It didn't reach its current state until round about the fourth century BC.

The purpose of the Wisdom books is different from other Old Testament content. These books don't recount the history of Israel or Judah. They don't record the words and deeds of prophets. They don't set out the glory of God or his relationship with his chosen people. They don't tell a story of any kind, true or fictitious. They don't have any chronology, any timeline. So what are they doing in Jewish scripture and our Bible?

The books of wisdom were compiled by scribes, sages, 'wise men'. They were not priests or prophets, but were probably court officials and administrators, people who were politically astute and who were responsible for keeping the machinery of government going. They pulled together a series of wise sayings, principles and maxims for regulating daily life. These often included, or were based on, popular sayings — hence 'Proverbs'. This was a generally good idea, but there was a more definite purpose. 'Wisdom' was formally taught in schools, so suitable textbooks were required. Wisdom was initially part of the education of any young man intending to take up a position in the Israelite equivalent of the Civil Service. But it wasn't only a part of the Israelite higher education curriculum. Part of the book of Proverbs is based directly on an Egyptian wisdom text written somewhere between 1000 and 600 BC.

In Israel the purpose of wisdom teaching gradually changed. After their return from exile the Israelites no longer had a monarchy with its associated bureaucracy, but the sages became recognised teachers and community leaders, and continued to teach wisdom in their local schools. Their emphasis gradually shifted from laying the foundation for a good and successful career to providing the intellectual basis for a good and successful life. God was mentioned very rarely in the wisdom literature, but there was always the over-arching acceptance that all wisdom is a gift from God, and that ultimately only God is wise.

So today we have six verses from a school textbook, containing material allegedly originated by Solomon. We have no idea whether he actually did write or say these words, but it is certainly very old and Solomon was the wise man *par excellence*, so it was logical to attribute them to him, and it certainly added authority. It's a pity we have only read these six verses, because the following twelve not only make much more sense of the first six, but they also make the connection with the gospel reading much clearer.

The first few chapters of Proverbs contain two rather stereotypical characters, one of whom is 'Lady Wisdom'. If you're pleased (as most women are) that Wisdom is a lady, you need to

remember that the other character is also a lady — 'Lady Folly'. It may also help to remember that only young men were taught in these schools, so the idea of ladies might be particularly memorable. 'Folly' is presented as a loose woman, a seductress, adulterer, even a prostitute; someone who is superficially attractive and exciting but whose acquaintance leads to ruin and metaphorical or actual death. This is practical career advice as well as spiritual counsel — an illicit affair was very likely to ruin a career in ancient Egyptian or Israelite public life. Some things don't change. 'Wisdom', on the other hand, is a responsible, upright, capable, honourable and perhaps initially slightly elusive woman. It takes time to learn to love her, but she will give you insight and a rewarding life.

So in the passage we heard today, Lady Wisdom makes careful and protracted preparation for her banquet, and sends her maids out to offer invitations — she waits inside her house for the guests to come. In contrast, a few verses later on, Lady Folly is found sitting at the open door of her house — 'she is wanton and knows no shame'. She entices passers-by to come in and taste secret delights, but they will also bring themselves to ruin. Wisdom offers fresh meat and spiced wine, good, nourishing food, but Folly has only secret bread and stolen water (a metaphor for foolish behaviour and forbidden pleasures).

This is where the link to the gospel becomes clear. Wisdom has the banquet of nourishing food which maintains a healthy life, and Jesus has — indeed Jesus himself is — the living bread that leads to salvation. Although Proverbs is a secular book, concerned with sensible recommendations for working in a government office and maintaining a respectable family it acknowledges, beautifully and poetically just a chapter earlier, that Lady Wisdom was created by God as the very first of his acts of creation ('in the beginning was the Word'), and that she was there with him enjoying everything in the world that he made. So Wisdom comes from God, and to follow the precepts of wisdom is to live a godly life.

And just as, last week, St. Paul hammered home the lesson about living by the Word, here he instructs us to live as wise people, to understand the will of the Lord and to be filled with the Spirit. At which point we have come full-circle, because the Holy Spirit, which is given by God to guide us, is Wisdom, there with God at the beginning of creation and here with us always as we tread the path of salvation.