

### **Proverbs 9:1-6, John 6:51-58**

Things are seldom what they seem. Skim milk masquerades as cream. With those words the mysterious Mrs Cripps, or Little Buttercup, warns the captain of HMS Pinafore that what he takes for granted may not, in fact, be relied upon. His station in life as a captain will shortly disappear when it is revealed that as a baby of low condition he was mixed up with a regular patrician - don't you love the rhymes - and should in fact be a common sailor. The notion that things are seldom what they seem could form part of a summary of the entire Bible.

Take our first reading, from the Book of Proverbs. Wisdom has built her house, she has set up her seven pillars. She has slaughtered her beasts, she has mixed her wine, she has also set her table. She has sent out her maids to call from the highest places in the town, "Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!" To him who is without sense she says, "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Leave simpleness, and live, and walk in the way of insight."

Now this is a strange account. Wisdom is a woman who has prepared a great party, and opened her house to the simple. In ancient Judah, of course, a host is far more likely to be a man. And, whether man or woman, the host would ensure the safe arrival of his guests by sending

out strong male servant, probably carrying large staves, who would escort the guests into the security of the hosts precinct. Here, however, we have young woman going across the town and calling out to all and sundry the fact a party is taking place. It becomes clear, with a little careful examination, that this is a very particular sort of party, the sort of party of which young men are all too fond, provided they have the necessary money, the essential element which the invitation is likely to omit.

Later in Proverbs 9 we read of another woman seeking the attention of men. She sits on her own, does her own advertising, offering the delights of stolen bread, of adultery, presumably, and pleasure that is illegitimate. It's easy to contrast this woman - some sort of prostitute - with the figure of Wisdom of whom we heard. Such a contrast is intended, but it is not, please note, a contrast between a virtuous woman and a harlot. Rather it is, I fear, a contrast between what we might call high and low class pleasures. Wisdom is the sophisticated madam, who runs a well to do and well kept house of pleasure: the foolish woman works alone, probably in poverty, and no-one respectable would go near her.

What's going on here? Wisdom and sexuality are being held up for comparison. This is far from the only place in the Bible where such a

link is made. It is no accident that the Queen of Sheba comes to Solomon with endless questions. It is no accident that the erotic poem which finds its way into the scriptures is called the Song of Solomon. The precarious character of youth seems well brought out by portraying the benefits and attractions of wisdom as similar to those rather more predictable attractions we associate with adolescence. But there is more to it than that, of course, because wisdom is something creative, like human biology, and the genuine desire to be united with something beyond oneself is one which spiritual writers have not been slow to notice. The sermons on the Song of Solomon, or Song of Songs, by Bernard of Clairvaux remain some of the most profound of all Christian writings, developing as they do the notion of the mystical marriage between the divine Word and the human soul which is the basis of Christian spiritual life.

For a Christian, spiritual life and real life are the same thing. Likewise, for the wisdom authors of the Old Testament, the only true life is the life of wisdom. To seek other, transitory pleasures is to seek folly, because only the pursuit of wisdom, undertaken in the faith and fear of the God of Israel, will lead the young man to real life, real happiness. The sexual metaphor has a double power here, since it is a relationship of union which the young man seeks – union between a human person and the

persona styled as wisdom – and that relationship of union is creative, it is the source of true life.

The union between Christ and his church has, of course, a rather more obvious physical source, in the practical workings out of the life of grace which we call the Christian sacraments. The sixth chapter of John's gospel brings this physical source to our attention almost crudely, for it has Jesus tell us that whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life. As you might have heard me say before, "eats" is not quite an adequate translation here because the verb *trogo* means something like "to munch": the evangelist is pointing us to the robust physicality of the Eucharistic miracle: the body and blood of Christ are genuinely the sustenance of life, just as are ordinary food and drink. The life here being sustained is not ordinary - it is eternal life, true life in God - but it is real life nevertheless, a life as real as, in fact more real than, the life of blood and breath.

Eternal life in John's gospel has much in common with the life of wisdom. The authors of Proverbs sought to portray that life as having the power and the attraction of sexuality; the author of the Fourth Gospel reminds his readers that eternal life is something real and something earthy, something which can only be sustained by feeding on Christ. Notice that all who eat and drink the body and blood of Christ

will have eternal life and - separately - will be raised up on the last day. In other words, that eternal life, though it has a future element, is not something which belongs at a far distant date. In the words of the hymn, now is eternal life, if risen with Christ we stand.

Things are seldom what they seem. Wisdom is a madam. But a good madam. Jesus, the Galilean preacher, is in fact food and drink, the stuff which sustains life. True wisdom, the eternal Word personified in Christ, is something which is needful, something which involves relationship, something which is the source of life. None of this could in any way be said to be obvious. We might, on the contrary, claim it as ridiculous. Certainly Jesus's hearers think so: "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" A very good question, and a question which will be answered by that greatest of all surprises, the life of love which springs from death itself.