

Where is wisdom to be found? Finding meaning in the web of information.

(The 1997 Reuther Oration)

Introduction

Early in this century, the poet T S Eliot lamented:

*All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance,
All our ignorance brings us nearer to death,
But nearness to death no nearer to God.
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?
The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries
Bring us farther from God and nearer to the Dust.*

I wonder what Eliot would say today, more than 60 years since he wrote those lines. In our so-called 'information age', another writer comments, 'we have a sea of information in which we are drowning' (Birch 1990: 127). Our electronic media pour out an endless supply of undifferentiated information, and all types of data, irrespective of their origin, are often accorded the same authority. What guidance can we give to students currently in our Lutheran schools, to help them to deal with this deluge of data? What values are still held in common by our post-modern, individualistic society that seeks to construct personal versions of 'truth'? How can our students be helped to evaluate various sources of 'truth' if the question asked is no longer 'Is it true?' but 'How do I feel about this?'. A recent TV advertisement for rapid printing provided the following insight: 'The world has a new currency called information. Its value is determined by the rate at which it is exchanged'.

Adding to this confusion is the division of knowledge into disciplines which are the preserve of 'experts'. So-called 'educated people' tend to learn more and more about less and less until they know almost everything about almost nothing. The various disciplines are often seen as unrelated and there is a difficulty of communication of information from one discipline to another because of the technical language involved. Given this situation, how can our students form a coherent world-view into which to incorporate their life experiences?

Social commentator, Hugh Mackay in his week-end article in *The Australian* in November last year (16-17 November 1996, 2) wrote as follows:

*the most worrying aspect of our love affair with information is that, like all materialistic passions, it will distract us from the natural urge to explore the mystery at the centre of our lives and to attach some meaning to our existence. Information is not the pathway to enlightenment, happiness or wisdom. Information is only data, after all, and it is possible to have too much of it.
In fact, information can get in the way of wisdom unless we leave ourselves sufficient time and energy to reflect on it, make sense of it, and integrate it into our lives.*

Against this background, and as we move towards the new millennium, can the Lutheran school help its staff and students to find some way through the web of information? Is there some sense of direction for students 'leaping around using hypertext to flit from one bit of information to another, almost at random' (Neiwenhausen 1997: 3)? Is the concept of 'wisdom' still relevant in a postmodern educational context? How can we help students in Lutheran schools develop an integrated approach to living in the 21st century? Do Lutheran schools help students, not only to acquire skills for employment and to accumulate information, but also to gain knowledge and even wisdom, to know how to live and ultimately how to die?

As Lutheran educators who can draw on insights from God's revelation as well as from human reason, we listen to God's word for direction and understanding as we attempt to find meaning in the web of information. While the proliferation of data may be more rapid and more confusing at the end of the 20th century than it was in the 1st century or at the time of King David 1000 years before Christ, yet the human capacities and resources with which we operate have not changed, even if we may consider that we now understand more than previously about the way we function as human beings.

In addressing the concerns that have been raised, we turn to the scriptural understanding of 'wisdom', the most consciously educational material in the Bible. It is impossible in the scope of this presentation to do any more than indicate some of the relevant insights which relate to the issues under consideration and to attempt to identify some of the implications of these insights for Australian Lutheran school education.

But where shall wisdom be found?
And where is the place of understanding?

Job 28:12

1. Wisdom has its origin in God

Even though Scripture recognises that human reason can achieve great things, the Book of Proverbs clearly reminds its readers (9:10):

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,
and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.

Wisdom has its origin in God. This is so because it is God who created order out of chaos to bring the world into being and it is God who still sustains that creation. It is God who has provided the framework in which creation operates and God's plans direct and control that creation.

Obtaining wisdom, becoming wise, begins with the fear of the Lord. Respect for God, confidence in God, worship of God and respectful submission to God are the attitudes which lead to wisdom, because these attitudes enable a person to be in tune with God. These attitudes create the listening heart, open to God, through which God can provide the insights that lead to wisdom. Only as human beings recognise God's order in creation and support that order of creation, do they receive wisdom from God. Knowledge of God, and the knowledge which God gives, provide the context in which wisdom develops: 'the Lord gives wisdom; and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding' (Proverbs 2:6). And only 'the fool' claims that there is no God (Psalm 14:1; 53:1).

Being wise therefore means to live in harmony with God and God's creation using that creation as servants of the God of creation. It means fitting into the cosmic order and also into the social orders, such as family, which God has created. Fearing God means placing oneself in reverent humility and trust under the instruction of God and so living under God's will for creation.

2. Human wisdom always remains only partial

This attitude to God's creation also means realising that no matter how much information we may accumulate about the world, and how confident we may be of our understanding of the nature of creation, our knowledge always remains only partial. We can do no more than merely begin to understand that God's world is created for a purpose, according to a plan, and that all that happens is related to God's purposes. 'At the bottom of our knowing is a mystery, which is God's rule' (Brueggemann 1982: 82). This means, on the one hand, that we can enjoy God's creation, and utilise all human ingenuity and expertise in investigating it, understanding it, explaining it and helping to recognise God's plan in it. But on the other hand, as we explore

creation, we are led to wonder at God's mystery and respond 'in doxology, amazement, and gratitude' (Brueggemann 1982: 83). The best of human understanding of creation must always remain only partial.

Such a view of reality challenges directly any educational approach which fails to see that truth relating to the created order finally lies outside of human reach. There is a level of mystery which must always be respected, but which must not be equated with ignorance. (Brueggemann 1982: 74). Lutheran school education can nurture students in a reverent searching for 'truth', recognising the interrelatedness of life. Rather than dealing with disconnected data and individual fragments of information, Lutheran school education needs to provide an integrated approach to all subjects. How soon should schools permit students to begin to specialise, leaving behind important areas of knowledge which are necessary to provide a rounded approach to life? God and his underlying wisdom provide the unifying framework of reality that prevents overemphasis on any one section of human knowledge. Here is an important role for the teaching of Christian Studies in Lutheran schools – to help to provide such an integrating framework. Lutheran schools can help students learn to see and learn to wonder and to celebrate. And Lutheran schools can help students develop patience to realise that not everything can be known immediately and that mystery is an essential aspect of reality.

3. Human wisdom develops from the accumulated experience of people

But even though wisdom has its origin in the fear of the Lord, it is not seen as being restricted to the Old Testament people of God. Wisdom develops out of the accumulation of the experience of all people. It is not an individual possession. In fact, Old Testament wisdom literature draws on insights from the wisdom of other nations such as the Egyptians. Wisdom grows out of experience of the world and interaction with the created order. The wise person does not have to re-invent the wheel but builds on the insights and knowledge of others. Wisdom attempts to provide an understanding of the order, meaning and purpose of experience in the world, and to relate the accumulated experience of the community and the immediate experience of the individual. One generation passes on to the next those things that have been learned through trial and error also in the area of morality and good judgement.

For Lutheran school education, what does this imply? It means that in spite of the impression often given to the contrary, there is wisdom in the experience of past generations. There is a tradition of experience that the teacher represents with which the student can dialogue in order to examine the student's immediate experience. It is not only what is new which has relevance. This means a valuing of the past as well as a fascination with the present. It suggests the importance for Lutheran schools of the cultural heritage provided by the humanities as well as by the sciences and the new developments in technology.

There is also the recognition that together, teachers and students continue to interact with the created in order to build on the store of wisdom which has been passed on to this generation. Brueggemann (1982: 73) characterises this as 'both a forceful insistence that the world should yield its secrets and, at the same time, a patient respect for the truth which cannot be forced'. Just as a flower opens slowly from its bud to reveal its full beauty, and any attempt to force open the bud destroys the flower, so truth is revealed by careful listening in the fear of the Lord.

4. Human wisdom, apart from Jesus Christ, is 'foolishness'

In spite of the best efforts of the greatest of human minds, the judgement of Ecclesiastes (8:17) is clear: 'However much they may toil in seeking [wisdom], they will not find it out; even though those who are wise claim to know, they cannot find it out.' This is because there is another factor that must be considered – the impact of sin. Sin has corrupted all of God's good creation, including the search for wisdom. The fruit of the tree in the middle of the Garden of Eden was fruit 'desired to make one wise' (Genesis 3:6). But eating it resulted not in wisdom, but in death. As with everything else ruined by human sin, wisdom has become the opposite of what it should be. Separated from God's ultimate revelation in Jesus Christ, human wisdom is judged as

foolishness. And it is ultimately tragic foolishness because it exchanges God's revelation of himself for human attempts to reach God (cf Romans 1-2). Human wisdom may help to provide some insights into the human condition, but it cannot provide a solution to the basic problem of human beings.

God's wisdom is revealed in Jesus Christ who reveals himself in suffering and service. 'The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Matthew 20:28). But Jesus Christ is also 'the truth' (John 14:6). In Jesus Christ we see God as he has revealed himself, ourselves as we are, and the world as God would have it to be.

Saint Paul argues this perspective in chapters one and two of his first letter to the Corinthians. What appears to human wisdom as foolishness, 'a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles (1 Corinthians 1:23), God reveals as his wisdom. What appears to be God's moment of greatest weakness in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, is really his time of greatest power. Theology of the cross is a theology of opposites - God revealing his power in apparent weakness. But by this very act of dying on the cross, God reveals human wisdom for what it is, for 'Christ [is] 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: 24-25).

Lutheran school education sees itself as Christ-centred. But that can mean many different things. At worst, it may simply suggest that Jesus Christ provides some sort of veneer of respectability or morality for the school. Jesus Christ stands at the centre of the school as no more than an example to follow. But if a Lutheran school is to help its students develop an integrated world-view with its origin in the fear of the Lord and based on theology of the cross, then it has to challenge a number of presuppositions of current education. It has to present an anthropology diametrically opposed to that of secular humanism which has been the basis of so much educational theory during this century. It has to find a way of demonstrating the 'mind of Christ' (Philippians 2:1-11) which is shown in servant-hood and which opposes the motivation of success, competition and individualism which permeates so much of current education. Lutheran schools need to develop methodologies of cooperation, collaboration and mutual support which challenge students to use their God-given gifts and abilities as fully as possible in the service of school, church and community.

5. True wisdom is revealed through the work of the Holy Spirit

Wisdom which has God as its origin and which recognises Jesus Christ as God's true wisdom is not a wisdom which comes through human discovery and insight, but wisdom which comes through revelation. Human wisdom may stand in the service of the Holy Spirit, but true wisdom is revealed by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:6-16).

Though the work of the Holy Spirit we can begin to comprehend the wisdom of God, as shown in God's dealings with his people through history, but particularly as revealed in the cross of Jesus Christ. Through the Spirit we receive the gift of faith which rests 'not on human wisdom but on the power of God' (1 Corinthians 2:5). Through faith we begin to gain some understanding of God's wisdom contained in his secret plan (Ephesians 1) for the salvation of the world. As the Spirit reveals Christ, Christ reveals the Father.

This means that Lutheran school education grows out of the work of the Holy Spirit through the means of grace – through word and sacrament. Only in this way will students and staff be able to get beyond examination of human wisdom and share in the wisdom of God which leads to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ (2 Timothy 3:15). And having come to faith through the work of the Holy Spirit, students and staff can live as 'imitators of God' (Ephesians 5:1), walking as 'wise' (5:15), rather than as 'foolish' (5:17), understanding 'the will of God' (5:17). Being 'filled with the Spirit' (5:18) they can then 'be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ' (5:21), 'giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ' (5:20).

Returning to our starting point – a challenge for Lutheran schools

Lutheran schools need to help their students deal with the deluge of data to which they are subjected, to find meaning in the maze of information which can easily bewilder them, and to develop a coherent framework into which to integrate their life experiences. Lutheran schools need to help to prepare their students to become individuals who are as fully rounded as possible, ready to serve in church and community. Approaching this task from the biblical perspective of 'wisdom' challenges teachers to recognise that the person who is truly educated is the one who is related to God in Jesus Christ, and who lives in respectful submission to God, listening to the insights which come from human experience but always open to the direction and guiding of the Holy Spirit. In this way, Lutheran schools will prepare young people who are not only wise for life in this world, but who are wise to salvation.

Malcolm I Bartsch
Dean of Studies
Luther Seminary

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