

## **The Wise and The Wealthy -- 102818**

Wisdom has built her house, prepared her food, mixed her wine, and set her table. To those without sense she says, "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity, and live. Walk in the way of insight." It is in the Proverbs, as well as other places, that we hear the voice of Wisdom, the voice of God. But wait, what's this, a female deity? Recently we saw the Dead Sea Scrolls exhibit in Los Angeles, at the Science Center next to the Coliseum. Containing not just pieces of the discovered ancient manuscripts themselves, the show was a fascinating and thorough description of human activity culminating in the Ancient Near Eastern culture that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls. It is the culture that produced Modern Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In other words, it is our culture. We get an overview of human activity in what we call the Holy Land; the Middle East; the Levant, Mesopotamia, the Cradle of Civilization. We modern folk might add, "from a religious perspective," but up until a relatively short time ago, every perspective was a religious perspective; that descriptor is redundant. What religion just depends on which deity had the most glory at the moment. That depended on which society had the most power.

One display case contained a few dozen of the hundreds of figurines of the goddess Asherah or Astarte found in Palestine. She was the deity who accompanied the Baals and Moloch's and Yahweh's of this world. It seems God was understood to be female before powerful men insisted that she be male. Otherwise, we would be saying 'Our Mother, who art in Heaven.' Officials and those they controlled

around Jerusalem and the Great Temple became aware of and attached to a single paternal deity long before the common folk, who continued their fervent allegiance to female gods until a combination of illegalization, displacement and the passage of time made them scarce. Sound familiar? Human history continues to cycle from enlightenment to powermongering. Those whose activities are curtailed for a greater good always respond by trying to outlaw and demonize the peacemakers. The people didn't want a god who was many days journey away and under the control of who-knows what powermongers; they wanted gods who would give very present help in trouble, who would not suffer their feet to be moved, who would neither slumber nor sleep nor be restricted to Jerusalem.

Speaking of Coliseums: In other archaeological news, they're restoring the Emperor Nero's palace in Rome. The year '64 – not our '64, mind you, the one with The Beatles, Cassius Clay, and the first Ford Mustang, this was in '64 CE or AD, as we used to call it: The Christian Era, The Year of our Lord. In these appellations we see how the religious perspective of those in power determines Time itself. Mother Nature has given way to Father time in the dominant narrative. In July of '64, a catastrophic fire burned large areas of Rome to the ground. In the fire's aftermath, a huge swath of the city was commandeered by Nero for his personal use. The palace he built had its own artificial lake and hundreds of rooms, some with 36' ceilings and little perfume spritzers mounted above to keep everybody fresh. Clearly this was not the house that Wisdom built. Majestic and glorious, maybe, but not having been built on anything but violence and injustice, it could

hardly stand firm forever. Four years was more like it. In researching this upcoming Thursday's Eclectia class, I learned that Lithuania was founded by people who had fled 2500 miles to escape Nero. He was so horrible that his immediate successors knocked down a big part of the palace and eventually built a stadium that came to be known as The Coliseum because a colossal statue of Nero had once stood there. The Romans could be a little vain at times, even about their villains. Kind of like the way we name airports and things after politicians, even if their careers were pretty dubious. The rest of the palace was filled in with dirt, which they're now removing so we moderns can look with amazement upon what Nero perpetrated.

Nero was always a man who thought he was God and thus historically necessary, but he had to find a scapegoat to blame for the catastrophic (however convenient) fire. The perfect target was that obscure new religious sect, the Christians. So, many Christians were arrested and crucified, burned or thrown to wild animals in the circus. It is because of this brutal persecution that Nero was dubbed *The Antichrist* in the eyes of the Christian Church. Sounds like he deserved it. The second Antichrist on the other hand, is a little harder to guess. Anybody? It was Martin Luther, demonized by edict of The Church. Indeed, with every perspective being a religious one, it most certainly does depend on how much power and/or glory you have at the moment. This year's guy in a loincloth scampering around the circus ring being chased by a lion, could be next year's berobed Grand High Inquisitor, give or take a few generations. What's worse, a brutal dictator who says he's

going to persecute you and does, or a brutal regime of so-called holy men who say they're going to save your soul but persecute and torture you instead? Humanity continues to produce both of these types, in grisly variety.

All human relationships operate according to various economies. These economies are based on various currencies. For those subject to Nero's reign, the economy was one of pure physical power: he had it, they didn't. The main currency was violence: do what I say or I will destroy you. This is the situation that prevailed during persecutions of Christians then. Subsequently it has been the situation during persecutions by Christians too. I'm reading James Michener's *Poland*, and one of the main conclusions is that Christianity became the Polish national religion by brute force. It was violent physical power masquerading as spiritual power. It is still the prevailing situation in many places in the World today.

Contrast this with the economy at work when physical power is deprioritized in favor of spiritual power. The goddess figurines, for example, did not afford their owners any leg up in the marketplace, nor did they emit a high-pitched signal capable of neutralizing an invading force or sickening embassy personnel. They simply reminded their owners of the blessed assurance their faith provided: a very present help in trouble, steady companionship along the way and stability in the face of all life affords and inflicts. This is the kind of power that the earth goddess represents, that Wisdom represents, that Jesus represents. It is no accident that Jesus perceivable gender is fluid to say the least; God is not male any more than She is female. In this spiritual economy, presented in The Proverbs,

(parabolized) by Jesus, proclaimed by Paul and preached by Luther, maturity, wisdom and peace are of highest value, instead of wealth, prestige and the dominion: “Lay aside immaturity, and live. Walk in the way of insight.” “Be careful how you live, not as unwise people but as wise.” In this economy, the currencies that have the most buying power are humility, forbearance, lovingkindness and charity, the opposites of worldly power and wealth.

“Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed,” exhorts Wisdom.” “Do not get drunk with wine,” warns Paul, “but do be (en)spirited as you sing your sacred songs.” In other words, have a very good time, but don’t get carried away, for you will destroy yourselves if you do. And Jesus said to them, “Very truly I tell you my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them; the ones who do so will live forever.” In the Bible wine is often used to represent what is most desired and valued in this life, a symbol of God’s wisdom and coming reign. Here too, Jesus is the symbol himself: flesh and blood that are the spiritual currency of which Wisdom speaks: “Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity, and live. Walk in the way of light and insight.”

For us, maturity means continual assessment of the currency we are using in our relationships, and continual effort to align ourselves with God’s spiritual economy. Notes Richard Foster, “Each activity of daily life in which we stretch ourselves on behalf of others is a prayer of action—the times when we scrimp and save in order to get the children something special; the times when we share our car with others on rainy mornings, leaving early to get

them to work on time; the times when we keep up correspondence with friends or answer one last telephone call when we are dead tired at night. These times and many more like them are lived prayer.”

The practice of lovingkindness must find its roots deep within us. Wayne Muller tells the story of how Mohandas Gandhi once settled in a new village. At once he began serving the needs of the villagers who lived there. A friend inquired if his objective in serving the poor was purely humanitarian. Gandhi replied, “Not at all. I am here to serve no one else but myself, to find my own self-realization through service to these village folk.”

It is with wisdom that Gandhi points out: even as we serve others, in a spiritual economy, we are continually working on ourselves; every act, every word, every gesture of genuine compassion naturally feeds our own selves too. There is never a question of who must be healed first, it is always the poor who take precedence. And when we attend to ourselves with compassion and mercy, more healing is made available for others; when we serve others with an open and generous heart, great healing blesses us.