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March 23rd: Proverbs 21 & Ephesians 4:1-16

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The valuable in the hands of the valiant. The unity of the Church and the gifts of the ascended Christ.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Proverbs chapter 21. When a scoffer is punished, the simple becomes wise. When a wise man is instructed, he gains knowledge.

The righteous one observes the house of the wicked. He throws the wicked down to ruin. Whoever closes his ear to the cry of the poor will himself call out and not be answered.

A gift in secret averts anger, and a concealed bribe strong wrath. When justice is done, it is a joy to the righteous, but terror to evil-doers. One who wanders from the way of good sense will rest in the assembly of the dead.

Whoever loves pleasure will be a poor man. He who loves wine and oil will not be rich. The wicked is a ransom for the righteous, and the traitor for the upright.

It is better to live in a desert land than with a quarrelsome and fretful woman. Precious treasure and oil are in a wise man's dwelling, but a foolish man devours it. Whoever pursues righteousness and kindness will find life, righteousness, and honor.

A wise man scales the city of the mighty, and brings down the stronghold in which they trust. Whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue keeps himself out of trouble. Scoffer is the name of the arrogant haughty man, who acts with arrogant pride.

The desire of the sluggard kills him, for his hands refuse to labor. All day long he craves and craves, but the righteous gives, and does not hold back. The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination.

How much more when he brings it with evil intent! A false witness will perish, but the word of a man who hears will endure. A wicked man puts on a bold face, but the upright gives thought to his ways. No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel can avail against the Lord.

The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to the Lord. Elsewhere in the Book of Proverbs the king is described as giving life-giving dew to the land. Here his heart is described as like a stream of water, held in the hands of the Lord, who moves it wherever he will.

The king's heart, which ideally should irrigate the land with justice, is under the rule of the Lord. Such kingship is described in Isaiah 32 verses 1-2. Behold, a king will reign in righteousness, and princes will rule in justice.

Each will be like a hiding place from the wind, a shelter from the storm, like streams of water in a dry place, like the shade of a great rock in a weary land. The Lord's mastery of the heart of the king is also seen in the Book of Exodus, as the Lord strengthens and hardens the heart of Pharaoh. The Lord's knowledge of and mastery of the heart is also seen in verse 2. We can easily delude ourselves about the true intents of our heart, but we cannot deceive the Lord.

The Lord weighs and understands our hearts. He can perceive our true motivations and the true moral character that we have. The invalidation of sacrifice and prayer and other acts of worship, by unrighteousness or injustice, is a common theme within the New Testament and the Old.

What the Lord really desires is not the ritual sacrifices, so much as the hearts of his people and their obedience. This principle can be seen in the story of King Saul in 1 Samuel 15-22. And Samuel said, Hosea 6-6 is one of the verses that Jesus quotes on a few occasions in his ministry.

Proverbs 15-8 also expresses a similar principle. A person's lamp can be a way of describing the principle by which they act. Proverbs 6-23 For the commandment is a

lamp, and the teaching a light, and the reproofs of discipline are the way of life.

In verse 4 however, we see that haughty eyes and a proud heart are the lamps of the wicked. These lamps are themselves sin, and they lead the person to sin and destruction. It is not just sinful actions that are sinful, but also our faculties and desires that are bent towards sin are themselves sinful.

The book of Proverbs warns on a number of occasions against easy wealth, against get-rich-quick plans. Proverbs 28-20 A faithful man will abound with blessings, but whoever hastens to be rich will not go unpunished. This is a foolish way to seek wealth.

A man who is diligent will build up lasting wealth, but the person who is trying to avoid difficult labour and get rich quick will end up coming to poverty. He has rejected the principle by which true and lasting wealth is made and maintained. This warning against those who are hasty in trying to get wealth is followed by a warning against wickedness in the gaining of wealth.

The person who employs deceit in pursuit of riches. Such achievement of wealth is described as like a vapour. It is insubstantial and short-lasting.

It will soon evaporate in the heat of the sun. This warning against deceit is followed by another warning against the way of wickedness, a warning against violence. The principle here is similar to that expressed by our Lord.

He who lives by the sword will die by the sword. The wicked will themselves be swept away by the violence that they initiate. Michael Fox suggests that we should read verse 8 as A man's behaviour may be torturous, even while his deeds are pure and upright.

Such a proverb would be a warning against judging too hastily. That way of a man that seems strange and unfamiliar may not in fact be wrong. This however seems unpersuasive as a reading to me.

It is far more likely, I think, to be a straightforward contrast between the way of the wicked and the guilty and the way of the pure. Verse 9, along with verse 19, warn against the misery of living with a quarrelsome wife. Such warnings are found elsewhere in the Book of Proverbs.

In verse 19 of this chapter, it is better to live in a desert land than with a quarrelsome and fretful woman. In chapter 19 verse 13, a foolish son is a ruin to his father and a wife's quarrelling is a continual dripping of rain. The warning concerns a quarrelsome wife in part because the Book of Proverbs is overwhelmingly written to young men.

Perhaps the purpose of the proverb is to provide a warning about the potential miseries of an imprudent marriage. A young man led astray by his desires may not give careful thought to the consequences of a bad choice in a marriage partner. Yet he would be far

better off not being married than being married to such a woman.

Many lonely and unmarried young men have sought to enter into a marriage hastily in order to escape such loneliness. But the loneliness of the unmarried may be nothing when compared to the loneliness of those in an unhappy marriage. There are few things more miserable than a home filled with contention.

And perhaps there is no person better able to sow misery and bitterness throughout the whole of the household than a quarrelsome wife. The converse of this truth is incredibly important for Proverbs 2 as we see in the final chapter. A faithful and loving wife is the crown of her husband and can overwhelmingly determine the tenor of an entire household by her presence.

The wicked man has a deep desire for evil. He is merciless. He does not want to forgive but rather wants to see the downfall of his neighbour.

By contrast of course the righteous wants reconciliation. He desires restoration of the sinner. He is ready to forgive and he wants to repair the breaches and those things that are broken.

The simple person, the person who has yet uninstructed and has not learned the path of wisdom, can gain wisdom through moral exemplars. He can learn from the punishment of the scoffer the connection between deeds and consequences. He can also learn from the company of the wise.

The identity of the righteous one in verse 12 is a matter of debate. Many take it to refer to God. God is the one who brings ruin upon people.

However it could also be a reference to the righteous man. Such a person observes the house of the wicked and in his imagination he casts the house down, realising that it is not going to last. Alternatively perhaps he casts it down with a word of judgement declared against it.

For many commentators however this seems too much of a stretch and the righteous one is taken to refer to God. One could see a symmetry between our relationship to the poor and God's relationship to us. The poor depend upon others, upon other people acting on their behalf and showing compassion upon them.

We depend, in a similar manner, upon the Lord. If we show no love and concern and compassion for the poor, why should we expect the Lord to show such things towards us? This is related to a principle that we encounter on a number of occasions in scripture. There must be a symmetry between the way that we act to others and the way that God has acted towards us and indeed it is as we act in that way towards others that we enjoy the benefits of what God has done towards us.

If we do not forgive, for instance, we will not be forgiven. The character of the gift or the bribe that is mentioned in verse 14 has led to diverse readings among commentators. Bruce Waltke suggests that it is the bribe that turns away righteous punishment.

It is an evil attempt to pervert justice. William McCain suggests that rather it is the discreetly given gift designed to improve communication between two parties, to assuage anger. One might think of the way that Abigail or Jacob use great gifts to assuage the anger of people coming to attack them.

Fox suggests a third possibility. The anger is that of the Lord and the gift that is given in secret is the gift given to the poor. It should be read with the verse that precedes it as someone performs his charity in secret, neither boasting in his own generosity nor causing the poor to lose face, the Lord's anger will not be kindled against him.

When justice is done in a society, whether by the legal authorities or by the Lord himself, there are contrasting results. The righteous are heartened but the evil doers are thrown into terror. It is important that justice be seen to be done.

The manifest performance or occurrence of justice gives a signal to all within a society. It is an encouragement to righteousness and dissuasion from injustice. The fate of wicked people is the subject of verses 16-18.

The person who willingly leaves the way of righteousness and wisdom will end up in the realm of the dead. The person who is given over to pleasures will find that he becomes poor. And the wicked person is dispensable for society.

When destruction comes, he will be a ransom for the righteous. He will take the place of the upright in the destruction. We might recall Abraham interceding for Sodom in Genesis 18.

The Lord is deeply concerned that the righteous be preserved, but the wicked by their wickedness have made themselves worthless and will perish. This should be a very sobering thought. John Ruskin, a famous Victorian philosopher and art critic, wrote in a way that well describes something of the principle of verse 20.

Hence it follows that if a thing is to be useful, it must be not only of an availing nature, but in availing hands, or in accurate terms usefulness is value in the hands of the valiant. He continues, capable of wealth, and operating for the nation, in an economic point of view, either as pools of dead water and eddies in a stream, which so long as the stream flows are useless or serve only to drown people, but may become of importance in a state of stagnation, should the stream dry, or else as dams in a river, of which the ultimate service depends not on the dam, but the miller, or else as mere accidental stays and impediments, acting not as wealth, but, for we ought to have a correspondent term, as ilth, causing various devastation and trouble around them in all directions, or lastly,

act not at all, but are merely animated conditions of delay, no use being possible of anything that they have until they are dead. Solomon here makes a similar point.

It's little use to have great value in your house if you don't have the wisdom and the prudence with which to use it. The foolish person can only consume wealth, he cannot create it. It is much preferable for wealth to be in the hands of people who can use it productively, and use it for the benefit of many, than for it to be in the hands of fools and sluggards who will squander or destroy it.

Aiming for the right things is the subject of verse 21. Pursuing righteousness and kindness will lead you to find life and honour. Those persons, however, who seek to avoid the pursuit of righteousness and kindness, and get life and honour immediately, end up finding neither.

The effectiveness and the power of wisdom is manifest in its use in strategy and elsewhere. The wise man with his stratagems can overcome the mighty city, a city which could not be defeated by means of great brute force alone. Self-control continues to be central to the task of wisdom.

Keeping your mouth and your tongue is a means to keep yourself out of trouble. The fool, by contrast, speaks in a way that creates a rod for his own back. Verse 24 describes a recognisable character, the scoffer who is arrogant and haughty, and speaks with raging pride.

One of the great tasks of wisdom is to recognise types of persons, to be able to identify the scoffer, to see the more subtle forms of the sluggard, and to recognise a fool, even when he has a number of university degrees. The sluggard is the subject of verses 25 to 26. He is eaten away by his desire that is unsatisfied, because he has not worked to meet it.

While the sluggard is marked by a continual unsatisfied desire, the righteous person can give freely and generously. Earlier in this chapter in verse 3, we saw the importance of righteousness and justice over the mere performance of ritual sacrifice. Verse 27 takes this point even further.

The sacrifice of the wicked has already been shown to be an abomination. This abomination, however, is aggravated when the sacrifice is offered for some ulterior motive, as a mask for some sin, or an occasion for injustice, or a way of excusing some sin that the wicked person intends. In verse 28 we find ourselves in the conflict of the law court.

There is a false witness who will ultimately be found out, but the person who listens will endure, or perhaps the meaning here is that he will be victorious. The person maybe who listens carefully to the words of the false witness will be able to catch him out in his

falsehood. Or perhaps the point is that the faithful witness is one who pays close attention.

He cares about the truth of the matter, and as a result delivers careful and accurate testimony that will enable him to prevail. The connection of words with hearing here is interesting. The person who listens carefully, who has practiced the art of attentiveness, will be the one whose speech is accurate and sound.

If the listening of the man in the second verset of verse 28 is to the false witness, perhaps it connects with verse 29. The wicked man puts on a brazen face, but the upright, who is attentive, perceives the way of the wicked man. The chapter ends on a similar note to that which it began.

It began with the Lord's control of the heart of the king, like streams of water, and with the Lord's weighing of the heart. It ends with two other references to the Lord, to the way that the Lord's counsel and plan will prevail, that there is no scheme that could withstand him, and to the fact that whatever preparation is made for the day of battle, the ultimate outcome is from the Lord. Psalm 20 verse 7 Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God.

The outcome of events ultimately lies with him. A question to consider. This chapter says a lot about the relationship between wealth and its possessors, or between wealth and the way it has been obtained.

What are some of the mechanisms by which the principles described in this chapter in this regard can be seen to hold in the world around us? Ephesians chapter 4 verses 1 to 16 But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it says, When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men. In saying he ascended, what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attained to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness and deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. In the first three chapters of the book of Ephesians, Paul presents the remarkable scope of the Gospel.

It starts at the dawn of history. It reaches its climax at the end of the age. It goes from the depths of the grave to the heights of heaven.

It overcomes the alienation of man from God and the enmity and division between man and man. It is a great mystery, now revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ and his glorious Gospel. And in chapter 4, Paul speaks more directly about what this means for the life of the Church.

He describes himself as a prisoner, but a prisoner in the Lord. He wears his bondage as if a badge of honour. The physical constraints of human captivity placed upon him are spoken of in terms of his spiritual bond service to Christ.

He may be imprisoned, but he is imprisoned because he is captive to Christ. He then turns to address Christian practice in the light of the awe-inspiring reality of the Gospel that he has declared. We must live a life worthy of such a calling, act in a manner befitting of such a Gospel.

The calling isn't just the Gospel in some objective sense. It's the fact that we have been made part of this story by God's grace. God has called us, he has elected us.

We find ourselves in the middle of history, at the centre of God's purpose, a plan that has been intended from the beginning of all history. And now it is coming to fruition, in part, through us. And in response to this, we must be characterised by complete humility, by gentleness, by patience and by bearing with one another.

Humility is a virtue that would not have been seen as such by many within the ancient world, but humility is the only fitting response to the scale of the gift that we have been given. We are called to gentleness. Gentleness is not prone to wrath.

It is not prone to violence. It is merciful. It is without jealousy.

It is without malice and cruelty. It is kind. In the same way we are called to patience.

Patience requires mastery of your spirit, the ability to endure, to be persevering, to hope. We bear with each other in love. It is a posture that we take towards each other.

It is informed by the previous virtues. It is gracious. It is not vaunting over others.

It believes the best of others. It is hopeful for others. It is long-suffering with other people.

It avoids censoriousness and condemnation. And all of this is informed with love. We desire the best for each other and we commit ourselves to practical service and care for each other.

The focus of this section is on unity. The source of the unity that we have is the spirit and

the shape of that unity is a bond of peace. This bond of peace is held together by the spiritual virtues that Paul has just described.

And in speaking of the bond of peace, Paul is suggesting that the way of peace has a power to hold people together. It is a bond. It's a glue.

Paul now lists various facets of the unity of the spirit. One body, one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father. There are three sets here when you break it down and they can be arranged in a Trinitarian manner.

The first one, the one body arises from the one spirit who grounds its unity in the one bond that he forms. The spirit is the down payment and as such is also the one who guarantees the one hope of our calling. The second one is the oneness of the Lord Jesus Christ.

That corresponds to the oneness of the faith that has him as its object, an exemplar. And it's the oneness of the baptism in his name. We are baptised into his name, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, baptised into Christ.

And then the third one is the unity of the Father. The oneness of the Father establishes the unity of all creation under him and as the realm of his presence and his providence. But we can say more.

Implicitly Paul's argument depends upon the oneness of these three, one God in three persons. The final verse of this section connects the theme of unity with the theme of comprehensiveness that has been prominent throughout the Gospel. God is over all and through all and in all.

And from unity Paul moves to discussion of the diversity of Christ's gifts. Here he gives a rather loose quotation of Psalm 68 verse 18 and shows how it can be related to Christ and his work. The psalm speaks of the Lord's ascension from Mount Sinai to reign, perhaps through the story of the Exodus as he goes up into the land and reigns from Mount Zion.

Here it's related to Christ's ascension in triumph. Christ has won the victory and goes up to the throne in power with captives in his train. He gives gifts as a sign of his enthronement.

The same notion that gifts are a proof of enthronement is expressed by Peter in his sermon on the day of Pentecost. Verse 33 of Acts chapter 2. To ascend Christ had to first descend to the lower regions. This refers not, I believe, to Sheol but to the earth itself, the earth over against heaven.

Christ first descended from heaven and then he ascended and in his descent and ascent Christ moves through the entire order of reality, gathering it together in himself, uniting

it. Christ is, we might say Jacob's ladder. He is the conduit uniting heaven and earth.

He is the one that holds everything together. Christ's gifts take the form of ministries to his church, apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers. These ministries are focused upon teaching which instill the principles of true growth.

Now elsewhere there are similar statements that are made, for instance in 1 Corinthians chapter 12 verses 4-6. In that statement there is a sort of Trinitarian structure again. The gifts and their variety come from the Spirit, the services and their variety comes from the Lord and the activities and their variety come from God the Father.

Here the focus is especially upon the services connected to the unity and the gift of Christ. Apostles, prophets and evangelists primarily minister to the wider church and serve as founding ministries. Shepherds and teachers meanwhile are ministers to more specific congregations, guarding and instructing them.

There is some sort of a hierarchy here, a movement down from the head to the body, establishing the sort of hierarchy that renders a body an ordered body. However these forms of service, while representing the authority of the head, are ministering to and for the sake of the body, so that it might be established, that it might grow and flourish. The purpose of these ministries is to equip the saints for their own activity.

The whole church is to grow into maturity, not through the ministry of just a few members, but through its united work, through which the gift of Christ in the ministers has equipped it. Growing in such a way will lead to the unity of the faith. Faith is united, there is one faith and division is a sign of the church falling short in maturity or failing on account of sin.

Divisions in the church are a sign that something has gone wrong. That doesn't mean that divisions are wrong per se. The unity is not found in the church as it currently exists.

The unity is ultimately situated in Christ and the more that we are conformed to him the more that we will know unity. However our lives are much admixed with error, with alien principles of society and other things that prevent us from arriving at the unity of the faith. It should lead to the knowledge of the Son of God, he is the one true object of our faith and the more that we grow in that knowledge the more that we will find unity with everyone else who is growing in that knowledge.

This leads to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. Christ is the standard. We are being conformed to Christ through the ministries of the Spirit that he has given us.

Part of the intent of this is that we might be children no longer. God doesn't want us to be thrown to and fro by false teaching and by deception. We should have the wisdom, the clarity of understanding, the settled will that enables us to be fixed and determined

in our pursuit of the truth, no longer so susceptible to deception.

We speak the truth in love and these are the two criteria of unity. Unity is found in the truth. Unlike lies, truth has a unity to it.

Truth is one and the more that our lives are lived under the truth the more that we will find that we have unity with other people who are living their lives in such a manner. Love as well is another principle of unity. It's an expression of the communion of the Spirit.

Any approach to union that does not hold both of these criteria or any approach that pits one against the other or tries to subdue one to the other must be rejected. We need both truth and love and we will also find in the final analysis that these things are one too. If you are not acting in love then you are not acting in truth.

If you are not acting in truth you are not acting in love. We must grow into the head who is Christ. This growth occurs through the united work of the body.

The joints here may be the ministers given to the church by Christ, with each part being the members of the church more generally. The ministers given by Christ play critical roles but every single member must be involved. Paul fuses architectural and organic imagery here.

He speaks of a body being built up and elsewhere earlier on he has used the language of a building being grown in verses 19-22 of chapter 2. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. There is one gift of the Spirit but there are manifold and diverse gifts of the Spirit. The unity of the church is found in the one spirit but the practical realisation of this unity is found in the re-presentation of the one gift, in the manifold giving of our individual gifts of the Spirit in love.

The unity of the church then is not found in a gift that is given directly down and the church has no activity relative to it and it is given to everyone in an undifferentiated manner. Rather the unity of the church is found in the way that God has equipped us to be participants in his giving process. He has given us the Spirit but he has given us the Spirit in such a way that he has given us the Spirit to give and so each one of us has a measure of the Spirit that we might minister to others, that we might be means by which God gives to others.

What we have received of the Spirit is not for our own sake alone, it is for the sake of everyone else. This helps us to understand why Paul speaks of the body being built up by

itself. The gift comes from Christ, the ascended Lord, but it comes to us in a way that comes through the gifts of other members of the body.

The unity of the church requires the manifoldness of the church. Paul's doctrine of the church arises out of the ascension of Christ. The ascended Christ gives the Spirit by which he forms his body, in which he, as the head in heaven, is connected to his people on earth.

As Christ ascends, the Spirit descends and becomes the means by which Christ fills all things and gathers all things under his rule. It is because Christ has ascended that he can fill all things. A question to consider.

An important theme in this passage is maturity. How might we see the ascension itself in terms of this theme?