

# DIOCESE OF CHICHESTER

---

TO KNOW · LOVE · FOLLOW JESUS



YEAR OF THE BIBLE 2017

## Hear the Word of the Lord

A Lent course for the Diocese of Chichester's  
Year of the Bible

## Session 4 – Other OT Writings

written by James Dunn and Guy Bridgewater  
and edited by Rebecca Swyer

## Session introduction (5 minutes)

---

*You are more than half way through the course now! If necessary, allow fresh faces to introduce themselves. Invite course participants to continue their studies next term or in the autumn, and think about whether your local church may want to adopt one of the courses recommended at [www.chichester.anglican.org/bible](http://www.chichester.anglican.org/bible)*

## Suggested opening prayers (10 minutes)

---

*Prayers and psalms can either be said 'responsorially' (i.e. a leader leads and others respond), or 'antiphonally' (i.e. two groups of voices, each saying alternate verses). One way of splitting a group is by birth month – Jan-Jun and Jul-Dec. Music / hymn / song suggestions are made, but whether or not to include them, accompanied or not, and at which stage, is entirely up to you.*

O Lord, open thou our lips.

**And our mouth shall proclaim your praise.**

O God, make speed to save us.

**O Lord, make haste to help us.**

*Psalm 119 verses 97 to 112 (this translation is from the Common Worship psalter):*

Lord, how I love your law!

**All the day long it is my study.**

Your commandments have made me wiser than my enemies,  
**for they are ever with me.**

I have more understanding than all my teachers,  
**for your testimonies are my meditation.**

I am wiser than the aged,  
**because I keep your commandments.**

I restrain my feet from every evil way,  
**that I may keep your word.**

I have not turned aside from your judgements,  
**for you have been my teacher.**

How sweet are your words on my tongue!  
**They are sweeter than honey to my mouth.**

Through your commandments I get understanding;  
**therefore I hate all lying ways.**

Your word is a lantern to my feet  
**and a light upon my path.**

I have sworn and will fulfil it,  
**to keep your righteous judgements.**

I am troubled above measure;  
**give me life, O Lord, according to your word.**

Accept the freewill offering of my mouth, O Lord,  
**and teach me your judgements.**

My soul is ever in my hand,  
**yet I do not forget your law.**

The wicked have laid a snare for me,  
**but I have not strayed from your commandments.**

Your testimonies have I claimed as my heritage for ever;  
**for they are the very joy of my heart.**

I have applied my heart to fulfil your statutes:  
**always, even to the end.**

**Glorify to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit;  
as it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever. Amen.**

*A prayer entitled 'CHOICE' written by Eric Milner White (sometime Dean of York)*

**LORD, in the choices of every day,  
grant me to choose aright  
as in thy Presence and to thy glory :  
to discriminate not only between the good and the evil  
but between the good and the better,  
and to do the best.**

**Save me from treason to Thee,  
O my Master and King,  
by disguising to myself thy demands,  
by any choice of ashes for bread,  
by any surrender to popular standards,  
by any accommodation of duty or faith to mine own ease,  
by any the least betrayal of purity.**

**Rather grant me the Spirit of judgement  
to choose with clear eyes  
the ways of grace,  
the eternal wisdom and the eternal will:  
not only to choose, but to pursue  
all that is true, all that is of good report,  
all that is lovely;  
and in all to exalt thy praise and honour,  
my LORD and my GOD. Amen.**

*Hymn/song suggestions: to be completed*

### **Professor Dunn's introduction (10 minutes)**

Traditionally the 'Writings' has been the third section of the Hebrew Bible. They contain the historical books, starting with **Joshua**, the story of the invasion and settlement of Canaan, 'the promised land' under Joshua's leadership; and **Judges**, the early years of Israel's settlement under leaders like Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah and Samson. The moving story of **Ruth** follows, one of only three women mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew chapter 1.

Then the stories of Israel's kings, the first two, Saul and David, anointed unwillingly by Samuel and both leading a chequered career (**1 & 2 Samuel**). Under David Jerusalem is established as Israel's capital (2 Sam. 5.5-9). Very moving is the story of the rebellion of David's son Absalom (15-19).

Under Solomon the temple is built (**1 Kings** 5-9) and Israel prospers. But under his successors the nation splits into Israel (northern kingdom) and Judah (southern kingdom centred on Jerusalem). Notable are the stories of the prophet Elijah, particularly his conflict with king Ahab (17-21), and of Elijah's successor, Elisha (**2 Kings** 2-13), including the story of Naaman the Syrian (5). But the kings of both states are generally a depressing lot, with Hezekiah (18-20) and Josiah (22-23) as heartening exceptions. The sequence climaxes in Judah's disastrous defeat by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian captivity/exile (24-25).

**1 and 2 Chronicles**, written after the exile, tell the same story, from David to Babylon, with many genealogies, and a strong focus on the Temple. **Ezra** and **Nehemiah** complete the historical sections with the account of the return of the people from Babylon to Jerusalem, the rebuilding of the city walls, the re-establishment of the Temple cult and the law (Neh. 8-10), and the rededication of the people. The prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, were a great inspiration (Ezra 5.1; 6.14). The historical material ends with the moving story of **Esther** back in captivity. Chosen by king Ahasuerus to be his queen, she is able to plead successfully on behalf of her people when Haman seeks to destroy them.

*About the author of this reflection:*

*James D. G. "Jimmy" Dunn FBA was for many years the Lightfoot Professor of Divinity in the Department of Theology at the University of Durham. Of Scottish descent, he was born in Birmingham, England.*

The troublesome story of **Job** and his 'comforters' introduces the Wisdom writings which complete the Jewish Bible, the Old Testament. Then the heart of Israel's worship in the **Psalms**, many of them written by David, and still part of our own liturgy, equally moving and challenging. Who cannot make Ps. 23 his/her own? **Proverbs** is attributed to Solomon, and justly causes us to pause: 'the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom' (Prov. 9.10); 'a scoffer seeks wisdom in vain' (14.6); 'how much better to get wisdom than gold!' (16.16).

**Ecclesiastes**, also attributed to Solomon, is probably the most sobering book in the Bible, with its depressing opening pronouncement that 'All is vanity' (Eccles. 1.2); 28 of the 32 references to 'vanity' in the Bible occur in Ecclesiastes. The **Song of Solomon** is unique as a celebration of sexual love, two lovers praising and yearning for each other. Jewish tradition read it as an allegory of the relationship between God and Israel; Christianity as an allegory of Christ and his bride, the Church.

In the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint (LXX), the Apocrypha or Deuterocanonical books include the fascinating stories of Tobit and Judith, the further wisdom books, the Wisdom of Solomon, the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach (better known as Ecclesiasticus), and Baruch written in Babylon when the Chaldeans captured and burnt Jerusalem. Apart from additions to the books of Esther and Daniel, the LXX is completed with 1 and 2 Maccabees, the story of the successful rebellion against Syrian overlordship and the establishment of an independent Jewish kingdom in the late 2nd century BC.

### Group discussion (15 minutes)

---

1. What are the main themes of the historical books?
2. Of all the books of the Old Testament, we probably use the Book of Psalms most in our worship. What is so special about the Psalms?

### Bible passage (5 minutes)

---

#### *Admonition to trust and honour God*

My child, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments; for length of days and years of life and abundant welfare they will give you.

Do not let loyalty and faithfulness forsake you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart.

So you will find favour and good repute in the sight of God and of people.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight.

In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.

Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil.

It will be a healing for your flesh and a refreshment for your body.

Honour the Lord with your substance and with the first fruits of all your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine.

My child, do not despise the Lord's discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the Lord reproves the one he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.

#### *The True Wealth*

Happy are those who find wisdom, and those who get understanding, for her income is better than silver, and her revenue better than gold.

She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her.

Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honour.

Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace.

She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called happy.

*Proverbs 3 v.1-18*

### Guy Bridgewater's reflection (10 minutes)

---

In the Orthodox Church, readings from Scripture are announced with the phrase "Wisdom! Let us attend!" (their equivalent to "Hear the Word of the Lord").

It is a striking summons to pay attention. We may believe with St. Paul that “all scripture is inspired by God, useful for teaching, reproof, correction and training in righteousness”; yet certain bits of the Bible can get largely overlooked, in my experience. I wonder when you last heard a sermon based on the Book of Proverbs, for example.

One of the good things about The Year Of The Bible is challenging us to engage with *all* Scripture - not just the set Gospel for the day, or our own favourite go-to passages. “Wisdom, let us attend!”

Jesus would approve I’m sure – he was himself of course, a Rabbi who taught with such wisdom (as well as healing power) that crowds flocked to learn from him, how to live life well as God’s people.

That search for practical life wisdom is a natural concern of every generation, including our own – and as we flick through these middle pages of the Old Testament, again and again we meet the perfectly contemporary question: How can we be truly wise?

These volumes from Joshua to Song of Songs cover around 800 years of history, from the conquest of the Promised Land; through the era of the Judges (Deborah, Gideon, Samson and so on); to the reigns of King Saul, King David, King Solomon - and beyond, into exile and eventual return from Babylon. Here we meet bold and repeated application of God’s wisdom to current events, as prophets like Samuel and Nathan, Elijah and Elisha, speak “truth to power” and confront the spiritual compromise of the day – things like intermarrying with the other nations, worshipping idols and building shrines to foreign gods.

The nation’s woes are often presented as a leadership problem, with the Book of Judges repeating the phrase “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did what was right in their own eyes”. As a result we may recall in the book of 1 Samuel, how the people cry out for a king like the other nations have - only then to find they are now at the mercy of the spiritual fidelity or infidelity of the ruler of the day. So that by the time we reach 2 Kings the refrain may have changed, but shows no real improvement: for every king who we’re told “did what was right in the eyes of the Lord”, there’s another who “did evil in the eyes of the Lord, as his fathers had done”.

It is a spiritual and cultural pendulum swing, that ends in the fall of Jerusalem and exile into Babylon; elsewhere in this Course we consider how God graciously calls his covenant people back through the prophets, and supremely of course through His Son. But in the meantime, these middle books of the Old Testament contain much detailed reflection on what it actually means to “do what is right in the eyes of the Lord”. Not just for kings, but for everyone: What does it mean to be wise?

The wisdom literature of Job, the Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are 4 invaluable books sandwiched between the history books of the Old Testament, and the prophetic books that follow. They harvest wisdom for right living, practical truth of immeasurable value. In the words of our reading from Proverbs 3 :

Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil. It will be a healing for your flesh and a refreshment for your body.

I wonder if as churches we sometimes neglect Jesus the Rabbi, in our keenness to focus on Jesus the Saviour; passing over “Good Advice” for wise living, in our concern to get to the “Good News” of salvation. Surely, I want to say, we need both... yet maybe we harbour a certain squeamishness about “dispensing wisdom”, in our own generation?

Unlike our forebears, who may have come across as morally over-prescriptive; now it can sometimes appear we lack confidence even to pass comment, let alone judgment, from a Christian perspective : “Who am I” we may think, “to tell folk how best to live, in this world of multi-faiths and no faith - what authority have I to speak up?”

If that’s so, I wonder if you and I may be passing up a rather key pastoral and mission opportunity in our day? We live in a consumer society, looking everywhere for life wisdom – practical skills for how to meditate and find inner peace (the whole “mindfulness” agenda); how to be better at parenting; how to fix a marriage under strain; how to have a better life/work balance ...

People are shopping around for wisdom and spirituality. As churches we may feel tempted to lament the individualistic, pick and mix approach with which consumers cherry-pick ‘stuff that works’. But isn’t this also a natural Gospel opportunity? If the biblical heritage contains riches “more precious than gold”, I wonder if this ancient wisdom literature could just be our ideal place to start in mission:

*About the author of this reflection:*

*The Revd. Canon Guy  
Bridgewater is Vicar of Horsham  
and Rural Dean of the Horsham  
Deanery*

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths

If God's wisdom of the ages is offered humbly and in contemporary idiom, I don't think it needs lashings of glossy marketing pizzazz; what works best is simple, honest witness that life just works better God's way (the 10 commandments are there for our own benefit, primarily; the Sabbath was made for man, not the other way around).

How do we get that message across? As ever we start by praying, for wisdom in sharing wisdom: "In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths

### Group discussion (20 minutes)

---

1. The Book of Proverbs contains 31 chapters of wise advice. Take a few moments to browse and find one saying that speaks to you and share it with the group. In our consumer society, how might the Church communicate (or "market") such nuggets of practical wisdom to others?
2. Would it matter if that nugget came across as an isolated bit of good advice, so that folk used it without any wider reference to Christian practice, doctrine and community? What needs to happen for Good Advice to become Good News?
3. A summary phrase in Proverbs says: "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" ... could you see nuggets of biblical wisdom inspiring folk to trace their true source, in the deeper goldmine of a living relationship with God? In other words - could we follow up offering life wisdom, by making mission connections between *what* works and *why* it works ... and because of *Whom* it works?

### Concluding prayer/worship (10 minutes)

---

*A prayer written by Henri Nouwen (1932)*

Dear Lord, you have sent me into this world to preach your word. So often the problems of the world seem so complex and intricate that your word strikes me as embarrassingly simple. Many times I feel tongue-tied in the company of people who are dealing with the world's social and economic problems. But you, O Lord, said, "Be clever as serpents and innocent as doves."

Let me retain innocence and simplicity in the midst of this complex world. I realize that I have to be informed, that I have to study the many aspects of the problems facing the world, and that I have to try to understand as well as possible the dynamics of our contemporary society. But what really counts is that all this information, knowledge and insight allows me to speak more clearly and unambiguously your truthful word.

Do not allow evil powers to seduce me with the complexities of the world's problems, but give me strength to think clearly, speak freely, and act boldly in your service.

Give me the courage to show the dove in a world so full of serpents. **Amen.**

*As a group, offer prayers of intercession for the church and for the world.*

*Song / hymn suggestions: to be completed*

*The grace*

**The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God,  
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all, evermore.  
Amen.**

*Copyright notices:*

*Scripture quotations, unless otherwise marked, are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.*

*Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England, material from which is included in this course, is copyright © The Archbishop's Council 2000*