Before we come to our reading this morning, I just want to say a little bit about the book of proverbs. We kind of know what a proverb is, don’t we? A short snappy saying that contains some truth applicable to everyday life…so we might have “a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush” or “a watched pot never boils” and when we hear those proverbs we know so well, we easily see that although what they describe is true… it isn’t always necessarily literally true. A watched pot will boil eventually, perhaps sometimes you will catch the two birds in the bush. But in general, it’s better not to watch the pot and it’s better to be happy with what you have than chase the unlikely dream and that’s also the case with the wisdom of proverbs; they talk about how things generally work, rather than being cast iron promises.

By and large the book of proverbs is a collection of these sayings presented as the instruction of a father to a son …and the family atmosphere is probably where most of them originated from. Family was the most important institution in ancient Israel. So, a lot of the teaching lies around those things that threaten the family unit: adultery, dishonesty, anger, for example. But a lot of it also centres around the virtue of wisdom… and our reading this morning is from proverbs 9 and it will tell us about the benefits and the virtue of wisdom.

Now, wisdom in proverbs isn’t about having a high IQ; it’s not about being clever, it’s about centring on God; making the right or the Godly choices. We all know that there are some very clever people who can make very bad decisions, especially when they choose to live by lies and deceit. These are the fools in proverbs and in the Bible as a whole. The ones who think they can do what they like with no consequences, who live for pleasure who want to get rich quick. So proverbs in extolling the virtue of wisdom presents to us this picture of two houses and two tables. And we see a simple person walking down the street – one who lacks judgement. I don’t think proverbs is trying to indicate anything negative about this person, it’s not saying they’re stupid. It’s saying they’re a normal person who hasn’t decided what way to go and perhaps we can relate to that at some point in our lives, when we have to make a decision but don’t know what to do. So, this person walks along, not knowing where they’re going …and they’re confronted by two women; both calling from the highest point in the city where they can grab the most attention. The first has carefully prepared a meal at her table and sent out her servants to gather people in. She calls to the simple person as they walk along “come in, eat and drink” she offers wisdom and understanding.

Let’s just look for a moment, at verses 7 to 9 and I’m hoping that I can get these back on the screen for us. If you joined us last week you might remember I spoke about the poetic parallelism we find in psalms and here it’s really obvious, so I’ll just diverge a little bit to tell you, explain… a little bit about what that is.

So, let’s look at the first verse “whoever corrects a mocker invites insult, whoever rebukes a wicked man incurs abuse” see how those two lines say the same thing? To correct is the same as to rebuke, a mocker is likened to a wicked man …insult to abuse and then the second verse, do not rebuke a mocker or he will hate you. Rebuke a wise man and he will love you. Okay, and then the 2 lines are saying the same thing but are drawing a contrast between them… and then this, instruct a wise man and he will become wiser still.

Teach a righteous man and he will add to his lands …and again we see the parallel. But when we look at those parallels, we can see that the mocker is likened to the wicked man and the wise man is likened to the righteous one and that tells us about something about what wisdom means to the writer.

So, when we come to verse 10 we’re ready for it to explain that outright. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge of the Holy one is understanding. And… here fear of God and knowledge of God go hand in hand. Knowing and doing God’s will is the key to the wisdom of proverbs; and this is what’s on offer at the first table; simple man walking by are you going to be a mocker insulting anyone who corrects you? Or are you going to be wise and look for someone who will show you where you’re going wrong and teach you the right way? “Come here, eat my food and drink my drink and you’ll learn the wisdom that comes from knowing and following the ways of God” “Stop dawdling about not knowing where you’re going and find the way of life” But a louder voice shouts from the second house, “she doesn’t have any of that useless knowledge stuff to offer, she just wants to party”, the simple are just walking past but she just wants to entice them in. “Look at how much fun, how much pleasure you can get when you don’t worry about all that morality stuff, all that God stuff, never mind doing the right thing, come in and enjoy yourself” it’s more or less the temptation that was offered to Adam and Eve right in the beginning, ‘all that stuff you know you’re not supposed to have that’s the best. You know you want it…’ and there’s a hint elsewhere in proverbs that this woman Folly is bound up with sexual temptation too. Two houses, two tables.

The simple person walking along lacks judgement, we don’t know why. I suggested earlier he might just be in a position where he doesn’t know what to do. But there are things that make that position worse …when we’re tired, when we’re stressed, when things around us and not quite going the way we want and we don’t know where we’re going. That’s when temptations calls us, that’s when our judgement is clouded as we walk along the road like the simple person. All we want is somewhere to sit and eat, where should we go? The table of wisdom is there, it offers so much but it feels like quite hard work, it feels like a place where we have to be awake and attentive and responsible. We have to be willing to listen to correction and learning about God. But seriously all we want is to get something to eat, somewhere to rest …there is so much going on already, that trying to get wisdom is really the last thing on our minds and at those times the table offered by the world seems so attractive doesn’t it, instant gratification, simple pleasure. No need for learning, understanding, responsibility, right action.

 I don’t know about you but there are times when it’s so easy to listen to that loud exciting voice of Folly rather than the sensible life-giving voice of wisdom. There are times when it’s easier to give to the loudest voice, to go with the flow. Not that we want to do the wrong thing but that it takes too much discipline and determination to do the right one. The problem is wisdom doesn’t make us feel better, not instantly. Sorry, you think it should. Sometimes it makes us feel worse, sometimes it points out our faults and our failings when we’d really rather ignore them. Sometimes it requires us to make difficult decisions, whereas the world of Folly encourages us to be happy, to do as we please, to enjoy ourselves, it offers escape from our troubles, forgetfulness of our faults. Pure pleasure no matter where that comes from, but the writer of proverbs gives us a warning. Little do they know that the dead are there. That her guests are in the depths of the grave.

The pleasure that folly offers never lasts, it promises life in the moment. You have to live; you only live once…but it leads to death. It leads to death because it leads away from God. It traps us in a spiral of pleasure, guilt, trouble that we can only escape from by seeking more pleasure. All the time getting further and further from the path of wisdom. It’s so easy to fall in to the trap of temptation set by folly because facing the challenge set by wisdom, especially in those difficult times … Is hard. But perhaps we need to look a bit harder at what is on wisdom’s table? Perhaps we need to remember when we’re hungry and tired, just what it is that she offers? To show us the shallowness of the offering of the world.

In proverbs, wisdom is the human way to a better life, and it begins with the fear of the Lord. To fear God, that is to honour him in all aspects of our life including in the decisions we make. Will lead us to peace and prosperity…remember it’s talking generally, not in every specific situation. But it sees that in general, making Godly decisions is materially and spiritually better for us than making wrong ones. So, to eat at the table of wisdom is to accept what she has to teach, it’s a way to true satisfaction and true life. Even at the times when that feels difficult.

The book of Deuteronomy says and Jesus repeats “that man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that precedes from the mouth of God” what’s on offer at this table is not just material pleasure but the truth and wisdom of knowledge of God. The strength that comes from his word …and then when I think of the food and the wine and offering of wisdom, I’m led to remember another table. A table where the bread that was offered wasn’t just physical bread, satisfying for a moment but leaving the eater hungry a few hours later. But it was the bread of life, the word of God. A table where the drink that was offered wasn’t just the fruit of the vine but was the living water. A table where the simplest person may come, however, they lack judgement and take into themselves the truth of God and find life.

Jesus stands at the door of wisdom’s house and calls us in. He says, “come to me, you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest” he offers us bread and says, “take… eat, this is my body given for you, this is true nourishment and spiritual satisfaction.” He offers us wine, “this is the new covenant in my blood, this is what I’ve prepared for you to enable you to know me and be in a relationship with me.” The house of wisdom brings us to the table of the Lord…who offers rest, who offers forgiveness, from those escaping the grip of folly. Offers relationship with the God, with the centre of all wisdom and understanding. Wisdom might not offer the easy road but she offers the road that leads to life. She might have even used these words from Isiah. “Come all you who are thirsty, come to the waters…and you who have no money come buy and eat, come, buy milk without money and without cost” “Why spend money on what is not bread and your labour on what does not satisfy. Listen, listen to me and eat what is good…and you will delight in the richest affair…give ear and come to me and listen that you may live.”

So, which table will you choose to eat from?

I know it’s not the third Sunday in the month, but that felt like it led into communion, so I’d like to offer you now an opportunity to eat and drink from the Lords table. If you’re simple and you lack judgement, which we all are at times.

Take a moment now to turn away from the temptations of folly and come to the table of wisdom. Learn the fear of the Lord. Receive the forgiveness offered through Jesus. The rest found in him, the nourishment given by the Holy Spirit, …we’re going to have a moment of quiet …to reflect on those things. To bring to God those times when we have gone the wrong way… and ask for his forgiveness before we come to the table.

So, as we come to the table let us pray… Lord God, thank you for the bountyess gifts you set before us …thank you that …when we turn away from our wrongdoing and come to you. You welcome us with love and forgiveness. For the thank you that you set this table, you opened it up to us and invited us to come to you.

Jesus thank you for your death on the cross …to allow us into a life of relationship and love. Holy spirit thank you for your gift of wisdom and revelation that we might know the God who created and called us. Lord God would you bless this bread and wine to us; to feed our bodies and nourish our spirits and bind us to you in covenant love. Amen.

Now, I’m going to take a risk here because I’m pre-recording this, so I don’t know who’s actually in the building …but I’m going to ask two people and if these people aren’t here feel free for someone else to step-in. I’m going to ask Linda and Mum to come up and distribute communion for me.

On the night he was betrayed …as Jesus ate supper with his disciples, he took the bread and broke it saying this is my body which is given for you. Let’s take and eat of the bread of life with thanksgiving.

After supper, he took the cup saying, “this is the new covenant in my blood…do this in remembrance of me… we will wait until everyone is served to drink together as a sign of our fellowship and unity in that covenant.”

Let us drink then, remembering the death of Jesus until he comes again.

Let’s pray together… Lord thank you for your body and blood poured out for us. Thank you for the table at which you’ve fed, nourished and sustained us. Fill us with your Holy spirit, that we might live by your wisdom, lives that acknowledge and glorify you.

In the words of Paul to the Philippians “I pray that our love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight so that we may be able to discern what is best and maybe pure and blameless until the day of Christ. Filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ …to the glory and praise of God. Amen.

We’re going to sing our final hymn …’All the way my saviour leads me.’