WISDOM:
PLAYING BEFORE GOD

Program Twenty One
I was speaking of the development of the conception of wisdom in the Bible, and of its being in its more elementary forms the individualizing of the law that appears in Psalm 119 and various other Psalms, speaking of the love of the law and of its permeation of the individual life. That leads to a sense of wisdom as founded on a sense of social continuity, and in particular of its being embodied in institutions. The continuity and the dignity of the institution is greater than that of the individual; and a great deal of our sense of wisdom is still bound up with a sense of continuity as embodied in institutions of the nation, university, church and law courts.

Wisdom as continuity of institutions goes back to the fact of a social contract, to the fact that we belong to something at least nine months before we are anything. Consequently ninety-five percent of what our lives are going to be is already predestined in the instant of conception: we were all predestined to be middle-class twentieth-century Canadians before we were born. That sense of continuity is also embodied in many conceptions of education. I was speaking of the curiously penal quality of education down to our own century, which is not founded really on sadism so much as on the sense that the existing tradition or custom is that to which the individual has to be assimilated, and if the individual does not succeed in accommodating himself to it, then so much the worse for him.

On that basis, wisdom is distinguished from knowledge, knowledge being knowledge of particulars, and most of those particulars being derived from nature, from the objective world, from human society or from whatever else is objective to the person being educated. Wisdom is rather a sense of the potential, a sense of the ability to deal with the kind of situation that may emerge, and from this emerges a more subtle conception of wisdom. The primitive basis of wisdom is the acceptance of the permanent continuities of society. But society isn't permanent, and it isn't continuous: things happen. So the question arises, what is the quality of mind that deals with changes in society or with unforeseen circumstances?

If you look at the conception of wisdom as dominated by an anxiety to preserve the continuity of doing things as they have been done, you can see that in many societies, such as Confucian China, that can be a very powerful basis of ethics. And yet, if you look at the history of Israel, with that manic-depressive chart of ups and downs that I drew for you at the very beginning of this course, you will see that that is a different kind of sequence altogether. A person who is going to live in that society needs something a bit more than a sense of the preservation of tradition and custom: because one moment you may be in a relatively independent and prosperous country; the next moment, you may be in a country which is occupied by an enemy, where your social circumstances
and status may be totally different.

And so you will find yourself living in a very insecure world, and will find that you'll have to rise above this fixation on continuity with the past and realize that what is continuous from the past is a more flexible thing. That is the difference, precisely the difference, between religion and superstition. Superstition is persisting in a thing out of habit without investigating whether it is worth persisting in or not. There is continuity in wisdom, and there is consistency in behavior as one of the sources of genuine human dignity; but of course there is always inorganic consistency, a persisting in things out of what is really an automatic habit.

If you look at the Book of Proverbs, in the 7th and 8th chapters particularly, you find the conceptions of wisdom and folly symbolized by two women, wisdom represented by a wise woman and folly by a harlot. Wisdom speaks in the beginning of chapter 8 of Proverbs, 'DOTH NOT WISDOM CRY? AND UNDERSTANDING PUT FORTH HER VOICE? SHE STANDETH IN THE TOP OF HIGH PLACES, BY THE WAY IN THE PLACES OF THE PATHS. SHE ERIETH AT THE GATES, AT THE ENTRY OF THE CITY, AT THE COMING IN AT THE DOORS. UNTO YOU, OLD MEN, I CALL; AND MY VOICE IS TO THE SONS OF MAN'. VERSE 12: 'I WISDOM DWELL WITH PRUDENCE, AND FIND OUT KNOWLEDGE OF WITTY INVENTIONS'. HERE, WISDOM IS BEING SPOKEN OF AS THE POWER OUT OF WHICH KNOWLEDGE EMERGES, AS AN ATTITUDE OF MIND THAT DRIVES ONE TO SEEK KNOWLEDGE, EVEN THOUGH ONE REALIZES THAT THE KNOWLEDGE ITSELF IS NOT AT ALL WHAT ONE IS AFTER.

VERSE 14: 'COUNSEL IS MINE, AND SOUND WISDOM: I AM UNDERSTANDING; I HAVE STRENGTH. BY ME KINGS REIGN AND PRINCES DECREE JUSTICE'. THUS, WISDOM IS ASSOCIATED ALSO WITH THE PERMANENCE OF AUTHORITY, WHEN THE AUTHORITY IS EMBODIED IN JUSTICE. AND AS SHE GOES ON, IT BECOMES CLEAR THAT WISDOM IS ESSENTIALLY A PRESERVATION OF THE COMMUNITY; AND THAT THE DISTINGUISHING CHARACTERISTIC OF FOLLY IS ITS TENDENCY TO TURN ITS BACK ON THE COMMUNITY, TO BE SELF-SEEKING, TO REGARD THE EGO AS THE BASIS OF ALL ONE'S INTEREST.

IF YOU LOOK AT CHAPTER 9: 'WISDOM HATH BUILT HER HOUSE, SHE HAS HEWN OUT HER SEVEN PILLARS: SHE HATH KILLED HER BEASTS; SHE HATH MINGLED HER WINE; SHE HATH ALSO FURNISHED HER TABLE: SHE HATH SENT FORTH HER MAIDENS: SHE ERIETH UPON THE HIGHEST PLACES OF THE CITY, WHOSE IS SIMPLE, LET HIM TURN IN HITHER: AS FOR HIM THAT WANTETH UNDERSTANDING, SHE SAITH TO HIM, COME EAT OF MY BREAD, AND DRINK OF THE WINE WHICH I HAVE MINGLED'. THUS, WISDOM CALLS TO PEOPLE TO PARTAKE OF A COMMUNAL MEAL OF BREAD AND WINE, SYMBOLIZING AGAIN THE ACTUALIZING OF A COMMUNITY; BECAUSE IN THE LONG RUN THE BASIS OF THE WISE INDIVIDUAL IS THE WISE COMMUNITY. IT IS THAT ASPECT OF WISDOM, OF WHICH THE SOCIAL AND THE INDIVIDUAL CANNOT BE SEPARATED, THAT GENUINE WISDOM IS ADDRESSING. THEN IN VERSE 13, THERE IS THE CONTRASTING FIGURE, THE FOOLISH WOMAN WHO REPRESENTS FOLLY. HER SALES PITCH
begins with the same formula as that of the wise woman. Verse 16: 'Whoso is simple, let him turn in hither: and as for him that wanteth understanding, she saith to him, Stolen waters are sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant'. That is the sense of ego-centric knowledge, of the possession that nobody else is to have, the secret knowledge which is being associated in the Bible with folly.

In the latter part of chapter 8 in Proverbs, wisdom, still being personified as a woman, goes back to the beginning of Creation, when she was presumably a child, and says in stanza 22, 'The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old. I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was. When there were no depths I was brought forth; when there were no fountains abounding with water'. Then she goes on to describe the process of Creation, and herself as a part of the process of Creation; because in the Biblical theory, wisdom is an essential part of the creative act. In it, wisdom is again spoken of as female, as a daughter of God, present with him at the time of the Creation.

In verse 31, she says, 'Rejoicing in the habitable part of the earth; and my delights were with the sons of men'. That's the King James; but the King James version is an extremely weak form of the tremendous Vulgate phrase that has haunted the imagi-

ation of western Europe for centuries, which doesn't say 'rejoicing', but comes much closer to what the Hebrew means, and says 'playing'; and speaks of wisdom as ludens in orbe terrarum, playing throughout the earth. That notion of wisdom as playing before God at the time of the Creation I think throws an entirely new light on the more subtle forms of wisdom that are taught in the Bible.

If you distinguish work and play, I think you may see that work is energy expended for a further aim in view; whereas play is the expression of energy for its own sake, or the manifestation of what the end in view is. A tennis player or a chess player may work very hard to win a match or to improve his game, but what he is doing when he actually comes in contact with chess or tennis is playing. As I have tried to show in dealing with Biblical imagery, the images are the revealed world in the Bible, are the images of human work, the city, the garden, the sheepfold, the farm and so on. But the word 'play' as associated with wisdom is the living in a way which is a manifestation of these forms when they are completed. Whenever a thing exists for its own end, rather than as a means to a further end, that thing is associable with play rather than with work.

That is why even such terrible and horrifying works as King Lear and Macbeth can still be called 'plays': because they manifest the way human life is as it is, and are not presented to you with any further end in view.
The wisdom playing before God at the Creation again suggests a girl child; so that while the Greek goddess of wisdom is a woman in plate armor with a petrifying gorgan's head on her shield, the Biblical conception of wisdom is something much more like a little girl with a skipping rope. And it's arguable, I think, that that is a far more convincing picture of genuine wisdom, of the expression of energy for its own sake. Certainly it is closer to Matthew's vision of the infant Christ as the goal of the journey of the wise men.

While wisdom is unattained, it doesn't follow that the thing which is unattained is essentially unattainable. It is certainly true that the history of Israel recorded in the Old Testament is not a history of continuous wisdom. But it is possible to attain it, if only for brief moments at a time. The Bible insists all the way through that wisdom is not something you get or something you have: it is something that you are; and consequently it's basis has to be an existential basis. In the hymn to wisdom in the 28th chapter of Job, for example, it says in verse 14: 'The depth saith, it is not in me; and the sea saith, It is not with me'. That is, it is not something you can find, it is not something that is there. It begins in a 'here' consciousness, and genuine wisdom is defined at the end by the fear of the Lord and the departure from evil. As I say, the basis is an existential basis, and that kind of life is nowhere presented as unattainable, difficult as it is to maintain it.

The primitive conception of wisdom is the permeation of the individual life by the communal tradition and prudence. But there are different degrees of absorption of that: and complete absorption comes at the point of complete spontaneity. That is why I said that the figure of wisdom in the Bible suggests the little girl with the skipping rope, and why Jesus places a child in the middle of his disciples, not as a symbol of uncritical intelligence, but as a symbol of genuine wisdom, where the absorption has gone to the point of complete spontaneity. There are many Eastern religions, like Taoism in China and some aspects of Zen Buddhism, that also stress the recovery of the child's spontaneity, that complete integrity of the rhythm of thinking and of doing as the goal of what they are teaching. In practically all of our ordinary life, action comes first, and thinking about the action comes a second or two later, as in T.S. Eliot's The Hollow Men, where the shadow falls between the idea and the response. That split second of time between acting and thinking about acting is part of what is meant, in Christianity at least, by the Fall. It's the shadow thrown over life that is bound up with the passing of time, and that makes it so difficult for us to live the purely spontaneous life exhorted by the Sermon on the Mount, where the comparison is drawn with lilies of the field.

I think that in Paul's argument, one works for a further end in view, but that is not the central thing that he's talking about, be-
cause that becomes a kind of donkey's carrot. You chase a retreating goal, and eventually find that the means don't lead to the end because the means replace the end, and eventually you lose sight of the end. Certainly some of the things that the New Testament means by faith correspond to what the Book of Proverbs means by wisdom: it's the same integrity of action and reflection on the action, the process no longer schizophrenic but the activity of a conscious being. That is why the Book of Proverbs says, 'I dwell with prudence, and find out knowledge of witty inventions'. I think the sound of that in English is right: I don't know how close it is to the Hebrew. But the sense of creativity is I think included in the whole conception of wisdom.

If we turn to the Book of Ecclesiastes, we get a little closer to a fuller treatment of the conception of wisdom. The word 'ecclesiastes' is an attempt to render in Greek the Hebrew word which means preacher, koheleth, and the Preacher, who identifies himself with the legendary Solomon, actually lived many centuries later than the actual King Solomon. He is also, like so many wise men, a collector of proverbs; but he has a kind of touchstone, a phrase which is translated in the King James Bible as 'Vanity of vanities; all is vanity', which he applies to all the proverbs that he collects and quotes, and which means: practically all of this is baloney anyway, and you don't need to take it too seriously.

The phrase 'Vanity of vanities' is from the Hebrew way of forming the superlative, as in the holy of holies, or Song of Songs. The word 'vanity' has a metaphorical kernel which means 'fog' or 'mist'; from there it developed a derived sense of 'emptiness', and it's from the sense of 'emptiness' that the Vulgate gets the word vanitas, which is the source of the King James 'vanity'. So that to put the essential position of 'ecclesiastes' into the form of its central paradox, one would say that all things are full of emptiness.

I think that there is no book in the Bible worse served by its translators than the Book of Ecclesiastes, and the King James Bible is I think particularly misleading. A translation of anything is likely to be, and certain to be if it's a translation of the Bible, much more homogeneous than the original. The King James Bible is extremely good when it comes to the solemn and rather somber eloquence that you get in so many of the prophets and the legal parts of the Pentateuch. But the closer the Bible comes to expressing a distinctively human tone, the further the King James goes astray, not so much in its rendering of the sense as in its rhythm and its sound. When you get to Paul, for example, with his very lively conversational style and his abundance of commercial and business metaphors, you often find that modern translations are really closer to the mood of Paul than the King James, simply because
the kind of English we speak now is closer to the kind of Greek that Paul spoke.

Ecclesiastes is a very late writer, and so his style is on the whole much less oracular than the earlier parts of the Old Testament. For example, if you look at chapter 2, verse 3, the King James Bible says 'I sought in mine heart to give myself unto wine, yet acquainting mine heart with wisdom'. Now what that means is that the Preacher went through a stage in which he tried to be a sensible Epicurean. That is, he tried to get pleasure without hangover, so he experimented in drinking without getting drunk. But when that is presented in language that sounds like something out of an oraison funebre by Bossuet, the reader is badly misled, not so much about the sense of what he's saying as about the tone.

And so, when you read in the commentaries that the author of Ecclesiastes is really an old, pessimistic man who is tired of life, (A) throw the book in the basket and, (B) read the Book of Ecclesiastes again, because you are being totally misled about the actual emotional attitude of a shrewd and humorous and toughminded writer. Being tired of life is the very last thing he is, and in fact being tired of life is the one disease for which he has no remedy to suggest. You should get rather the impression of somebody determined to tear off all the veils of illusion and superstition that keep repressing our mental processes. We often speak of being disillusioned as something that leaves us feeling dismal. But of course we shouldn't feel dismal if we get disillusioned; we ought to feel as though we've been let out of jail. Illusions are a prison.

There was a time when we went to school to learn the three R's. But we now go to learn the three A's: anxiety, absurdity and alienation. That is the primer of twentieth-century man: if a person knows the meaning of those three words, he knows all the wisdom that the twentieth century can teach him, which, God knows, is little enough. Anyway, the author of Ecclesiastes is aware of all these three A's, and he tells you how to get through them. Most of it, of course, consists simply of ignoring them; but there are other things to do as well.

I think I've said before, in commenting on the imagery of the Bible, that in the Bible as in other works, you find the world divided between visible and invisible reality. There are many thinkers for whom the invisible world forms an order of reality superior to that of the visible world. In commenting on creation, I've suggested that while the Bible recognizes an invisible world, it doesn't think of it as a superior order of reality. It thinks of the invisible world rather as the means by which the world becomes visible. That is, if you start to think of things that you can't see but know to exist, the first thing you might think of is the air. You can't see the air because if you did, you could see nothing
else. If you could see the air, you would be living in a dense fog or mist, which is one of the metaphorical meanings of this word 'vanity'. You can't see the air because its being invisible enables you to see what is not air. In the account of creation at the beginning of Genesis, the first things created are light and the firmament, that is, the basis of vision and sound. Because there is a sense in which you don't see light either: you see a source or reflection of light.

Thus, when the author of Ecclesiastes speaks of vanity, he has in mind a conception rather like what some Oriental religions are talking about when they speak of the void—shunyata. I think is the Buddhist term. That is, everything is there, but everything is in nothingness. The objective world is neither there nor not there. It is rather a forest that man has got lost in, and his schedule of behavior is connected with finding a way out of it. If he is oppressed by the objectivity, by the thereness of the forest, he will find himself tramping around in a circle, which is the inevitable symbol of lost direction. If on the other hand he assumes that the forest is not there, he will very soon find himself bumping into trees. So to find the way out, you have to steer a middle course. There is something in the forest which is there, and something which is not there. When you find a wedge between those two things, you've started to find your way out.

That, I think, is what the author of Ecclesiastes means primarily by vanity. It means that he is abandoning all the things that I've called donkeys' carrots: for one thing, the value judgment that wisdom is better than folly. He says that he decided that wisdom was better than folly; then he found that that was vanity, because the wise man and the fool both die, so there's no advantage in wisdom. 'Then said I to myself, this also is vanity'. That is, once you stop with the notion that there's no difference between wisdom and folly, you're in as bad a muddle as you are when you assume that there is a difference. If I can give an example of what is meant here, we may say of the village saint and the village sinner in a small community that the saint is the better man than the sinner, and that all our moral standards would collapse into chaos unless we assumed that the saint was the better man than the sinner; and that if they were both threatened with peril or disaster, the saint would be the more important man to save. That's all right, except that the saint himself would be very unlikely to take such a view, and would certainly in a crisis be more likely to try to save the sinner than to save himself. Consequently, the axiom of his behavior is not at all that sanctity is better than sinning: he has got to a position where 'this' and 'this not' are equally meaningless. That is the basis of the ethic of the Book of Ecclesiastes, which is very close to that of the Sermon on the Mount.