

Reflection for Pentecost 12 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

“Between a rock and a hard place”. It’s a phrase that is used to describe a situation where there is no clear-cut answer: whichever direction you take will lead to problems of some kind. Take one course of action and the result will be a particular series of events not all of which are to your liking; take the alternative route and the outcome is neither smooth nor comfortable.

Which way do you turn?

These sorts of situations require what could best be described as wisdom: the ability to look beyond the surface deep into the issue and choose away forward even if it presents further challenges. This is exactly where our leaders have found themselves during the current pandemic.

When Solomon becomes King of Israel following his father, David, he has a dream, recorded in 1 Kings 3, during which he is asked by God what gift he would most desire as he sets out on this new path.

Solomon’s reply is not for wealth, power or long life, although they were to come in his direction – but rather, wisdom. *“Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?”* as the Good News Bible translates it.

What Solomon is asking for is not wisdom in an academic sense, but wisdom that is very practical. One story of Solomon, more than any other, illustrates this; a story in which Solomon makes a ruling that appears to be both brutal and shocking at first sight yet proves to be the key to unlocking the dilemma in front of him. Two women, who share a house, come to Solomon arguing over a young child, each one claiming to be the child’s mother. Each claims the other has lost her child. What does Solomon do? It is the word of one against the other. Which one does he rule in favour of? One of them cannot be telling the truth, but which one?

Solomon suggests a simple solution: cut the child in two and give half to each. He waits to see their reactions. The real mother, because of her love for the child is more concerned that the child should live than die and is willing to step back. Solomon has the answer he requires and immediately rules in favour of the child’s true mother. What appeared hard and callous at first sight has allowed him to see, with the eye of wisdom, what is really going on and then make a fair and final judgement.

That story of Solomon’s great wisdom is not just about one man’s gift from God as he leads his people, it is about the whole idea of wisdom as we see it especially in the Old Testament.

Firstly, wisdom has its roots in God, not only does it come from God it is also tied in with a fear of God.

As Psalm 111:10 puts it *“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have those who live by it; his praise endures for ever.”*

Or as the Mishnah, an early Jewish commentary puts it *“A man whose fear of sins is greater than wisdom – his wisdom will endure; a man whose wisdom exceeds his fear of sin – his wisdom will not endure.”*

So wisdom is not only a gift of God, it also needs to be understood in the context of a relationship with God. As the Holy Spirit comes upon the church at

Pentecost and writers such as Paul talk about the gifts of the Spirit and their use, wisdom is one of those gifts - a gift from God.

“To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit.” 1 Corinthians 2:8

Secondly, if wisdom is a gift of God and given in the context of a relationship with God, then it also has to be used in the service of God; seeking and striving for justice and righteousness, bringing in the Kingdom of God.

Jeremiah puts it like this. *“Thus says the LORD: Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast, boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the LORD; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the LORD.”*

If this is true of wisdom it is also true of the other spiritual and practical gifts God gives to us: they are not there for our own gratification but for the glory of God. Why, for example, are some of the wisest and most saintly Christians always the last ones to boast? They understand this relationship, they know God gives gifts for his glory not ours.

What does the idea of wisdom as found in the Old Testament, have to say to the church today?

Firstly, wisdom is as much needed in the modern church and the modern world as it was in Solomon’s time. The grayness of issues is everywhere you look.

Take medical science and the endless stream of ethical questions it throws up. Or what of the profound questions in other areas - social justice, economics, environmental and climate change issues? And that is before we think about everyday life.

The voice of the Christian Church needs to be heard in all these areas, looking to take forward Gods will and kingdom and to be heard in a way that can give a positive lead. For that to happen we need people with the gift of wisdom where it matters.

Secondly, I think the story of Solomon’s wisdom is a reminder about priorities. Solomon’s primary concern is for his people and that they should be governed in the right way. It is from this starting point that he moves forward. He knows that it is only with the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Wisdom, that he can face the challenges that lay ahead.

We, too, must accept the same truth. We must allow God to work thorough us and this can only happen as we allow the Holy Spirit be part of our lives along with the gifts of the spirit, including the wisdom that comes from God. It is then, and only then, that the church can go forward and face with boldness the challenges of the world in which we live.

Wisdom is a gift of God. May we desire it and long for it.