

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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GOD'S GIFT OF WISDOM

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2 Chronicles 1:7-13

James 1:2-8

Who is the wisest person you know? Who comes to mind if I say the word "wise"? Maybe it is yourself! Maybe a member of your family, maybe someone from your past, whose advice or attitude to life still helps you as you think about life now. The world needs wise people, the more the better, and if there is one thing which everyone needs and wants as they go through life, it is wisdom. We may not use that word in our thoughts, but we want to do the right thing, to do the best thing, to make the most of our life, and not to make mistakes, and that takes wisdom. Any religion or philosophy has a lot to say about what wisdom is, where it can be found and what it looks like, and the Christians faith is no different in that regard. The Bible is full of words of wisdom and words about wisdom, and having thought last week about the wise men who visited the infant Jesus, I thought we might spend a few weeks looking at some of the things which we are told about wisdom, what it is and where it is to be found.

And the first thing we discover, from what we read today is that wisdom is in God's gift. God gives wisdom, and he gives it freely, when we ask.

We read first Solomon's famous prayer to God when he succeeded his father David as King. If there is one name in the Bible which is synonymous with wisdom, it is the name of Solomon, and this prayer is recorded by the Chronicler so that no one is in any doubt as to where Solomon's wisdom came from. It was not born in him, it did not come from good parenting; it came from God. All wisdom comes from God.

Solomon asks for this gift of wisdom as he contemplates the prospect of being King, of reigning over God's people, and making decisions which will affect them. He said to God that he sought wisdom "to go out and come in before this people." Solomon wanted to do the job well, to be remembered as a good king, as David his father was. There had been no certainty that he would succeed David: he was not the oldest son, nor even a child of the senior wife, and there was a lot of in-fighting amongst David's sons. But in the end, he was declared to be king, and then he realised what a responsibility it was. From now on he was going to be in the limelight, his words weighed and his movements watched and remembered. He didn't want to look ridiculous.

Anyone who takes on a position of responsibility knows something of what Solomon felt. Whether you are a teacher, worse, a head-teacher; a CEO; a politician, at any

level from Community Council upwards; some types of journalist; some sportsmen or women, and especially team managers; or if you are a minister – you will know that feeling of being watched and wanting to do well, not to let yourself or others down. You will be watched and what you do and say will be remembered. To do a complicated job well, to do your best for others, especially to do your best for a variety of others, with different needs and wants, wisdom is required.

Solomon asked God for wisdom, and he was given it. This didn't mean that he was a perfect king – the records remember the flaws as well as the successes. His wisdom is remembered more in his wise sayings than in the (non) perfection of his life. We call his sayings proverbs, and in them he gives advice to his people about how to lead your life: practical advice. He talks of hard work and fair dealing, of honest speech, of integrity and, above all, of faith in God. If you read the proverbs, they are not hard to understand. They are a bit repetitive in places, because he had the same message to give over and over, but they are not difficult to understand. Wisdom is not rocket science. It is not a body of difficult knowledge to get into your head. Rather, it is a way of thinking. God's way.

When I read the proverbs, which are the main body of Solomon's wisdom, I am reminded of a visit I was privileged to make to Egypt in 1989. There I met the same practical discipleship which was undergirded with profound theological reflection. I was there with a group of fellow-students, with whom I travelled into the desert to a Coptic monastery, where we were granted an audience with the Coptic Pope of the time, Pope Shenouda the 3rd. In his room in the monastery, he talked to us about theology and about ecumenism, and about the political situation in the Middle East. His talk was erudite and took some thinking about, for he thought deeply and expected us to do the same.

Later in the week, we attended a meeting held in the great hall in the basement of the then-still-under-construction Coptic cathedral in Cairo. There Pope Shenouda was meeting with his people, the ordinary worshippers of the Coptic church, who make up 10% of Egypt's population. This time he was not speaking English, but we had an interpreter. The Pope spoke simply about Lent and its practicalities, abstaining from meat and sweets, but filling up on beans and bread. And then he allowed questions. The questions were also practical: what did the Pope do about fasting in Lent when he was travelling: did he keep the fast? And the Pope answered that he kept it whenever he could, but did not think it was in the spirit of Lent to insist on special food being prepared for him – even if of the simplest – when he was with a host who had already prepared other food for himself. And other such practical questions, dealing with specifics, not generalities.

Solomon's wisdom is like that of Pope Shenouda. Or perhaps vice versa, since Solomon came first by a long way! We saw both sides of the man: the theological thinker who conversed with us, and the practical leader who told his people how to live. The proverbs are most often practical and specific, with just a few passages which are more theological, undergirding the rest and showing where the source of this wisdom came, where it was founded.

James talks of wisdom in the context of helping people understand how to live as a Christian. He talks of what to expect – trials, and how to receive them – with joy. And if that seems a strange way of looking at life he tells us why our trials should

bring us joy: because testing of our faith produces endurance and so matures us. And if that is hard to understand or accept, then wisdom is needed. Wisdom, which is God's way of looking at life. And looking at life in God's way leads – or is should do – to living it in God's way as well.

Wisdom is God's gift. If we ask for it, in general, for life, and in specific situations where we are out of our depth, he gives it. Indeed, the asking is half of the gift. One approach to wisdom is knowing our own limitations, knowing that we need help. This is as true in our areas of expertise in life – what we do or have done for our work, what we study and learn and seek to apply, as much as in what we might think of as the “religious” side of life. There is always more wisdom to be gained, especially in understanding people, including ourselves. The wisdom that God gives has a lot to do with faith and integrity. But it is God's gift, not something we attain on our own.

God was pleased when Solomon asked for wisdom. In the story of Solomon's prayer, God is given what you might think of as the role of the Genii. He comes to Solomon and tells him to ask for what he wants. And God was pleased that Solomon asked for wisdom above long life – which was not guaranteed for Kings in those days – and above wealth and possessions. God wants us to ask him for his gift of wisdom.

James tells us that because God is generous and gives to us ungrudgingly, when we ask for wisdom, we should do so with confidence. Of course, this doesn't mean that we have to have certainty about how God will answer our prayer – if we already know what his wisdom will look like, then do we need to ask for it? But we should ask, confident that God's answer will be given, that God's wisdom will be given. Our certainty when we approach him is certainty concerning the nature and love of God, not certainty of our understanding of God's plans and specific ways of dealing with us. We trust God, because, as Jesus said, even a human father would not give a stone to a child who asked for an egg, or a scorpion to a child who asked for a fish.

We know Jesus said that, we know that Jesus taught that God is perfect in his love for us. But still, some of us approach God in prayer with an element of fear and trepidation. “If I ask God for what I need, what difficult answer will I get?” Our prayers are so often not full of the joy of knowing that God is loving and generous. We turn to God apologetically, as though we are afraid to bother him – when really he gives generously and ungrudgingly.

All wisdom comes from God, who wants to give it to us. It begins with our asking for it, coming in confidence to the God who loves us, who wants us to live life well, to make the best of the days we are given, to be able to do the best for other people; who wants us to know him and in knowing him to be wise. So this week, in your prayers, why not resolve to ask for wisdom, for whatever situation of challenge of difficulty you face, for the challenges which face us as a community and as humanity. Why not resolve and remember to ask for wisdom, and to do so gladly and gratefully, not apologetically. Wisdom is in God's gift, and it is only with him that we will find it. Amen.