Sermon for 20th in Ordinary Year B

Readings: 1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14; John 6: 51-58

i

When Solomon asks God for wisdom it is not a moment too soon.

If we had read chapter 2, we would have discovered that Solomon only secured the throne of his father, David, after a struggle. His first move was to have an elder brother Adonijah killed. Adonijah had tried to take the throne during the last years of David’s life because he was the elder son to Solomon, and yet David had declared Solomon should be his successor. Solomon had pardoned Adonijah, but when Adonijah asked to marry one of David’s concubines, Solomon realised this was another manoeuvre to wrestle the throne away.

Solomon then killed one of David’s army commanders, Joab, who had killed David’s hitherto favourite son, Absalom, despite David’s instructions to take him alive. Joab had sided with David when his son Absalom revolted, but he did not agree with David over his choice of Solomon and had backed Adonijah’s claim. Joab tried to claim sanctuary in the holy tent (because Solomon was yet to build the temple), but Solomon had him executed anyway, even in the holy tent in front of the ark of the covenant

Thirdly, Solomon had Shimei put to death; Shimei had been one of Absalom’s supporters in the rebellion. After 3 years of house arrest, Shimei made a short trip outside the city to retrieve some runaway slaves. Solomon heard of it and put Shimei to death.

This is the man Solomon whom we meet in our reading from 1 Kings 3 who asks God for wisdom. As I say, it wasn’t a moment too soon!

Perhaps this was a moment of conversion, or at the very least, a moment of self-understanding. Solomon realised he couldn’t build a dynasty on internecine warfare. He needed a solid foundation to his rule and that, as he correctly discerned, was not the ability to be more ruthless than his rivals, nor even the power that comes from great wealth and a long life, but the only firm foundation was a moral one. Therefore Solomon turned to God for assistance.

Solomon’s wisest decision was to ask for wisdom! That is the astonishing truth. All else flowed from that – his subsequent fame as a wise judge, his great wealth and his promise of a long reign. Politicians and potentates the world over could usefully take a leaf out of Solomon’s book and realise that great government has a moral foundation. A moral foundation is far stronger than any military might, or economic dream.

ii

Unfortunately, Solomon did not walk the talk; he did not practice what he preached and eventually this was his undoing. Solomon is still revered in Jewish, Christian and Muslim faith traditions as the builder of the first temple and as a famously wise king, and by some as a prophet, but Solomon used his fame and wealth to amass a huge harem of over 700 wives; he imported foreign gods and worshipped them. So Solomon compromised his own dynastic foundations he had laid when he pleaded for the gift of moral reason from God.

When Solomon died he left behind a weakened dynasty and the kingdom quickly split between north and south, Israel and Judah, and was never united again under one king. Politicians duly note - Having a moral base is more than just political spin.

iii

John’s gospel is also about finding true wisdom. Yet it is shocking for people to hear.

We are perhaps now familiar with the idea of Holy Communion and eating the body of Christ and drinking the blood of Christ have lost their shocking and distressing effect felt by the first people who heard this.

To those who think at a wooden, literalistic and superficial level, such talk is cannibalism. That sort of superficial understanding is like the example in last week’s extract from this same chapter in John’s gospel when they said he couldn’t be God’s Son because they knew Mary and Joseph.

This metaphorical language is inviting us to look deeper beyond the crude simplicity of accusing Jesus of cannibalism. It is a striking metaphor that denotes an urgent and deep hunger and thirst for righteousness, for God.

Solomon asked for wisdom. Tradition ascribes *The Book of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes* and *Song of Solomon* to Solomon’s authorship. But wisdom does not come from books of wise sayings or from the intricacies of the law – but as Solomon himself initially understood, from God alone. Wisdom is an interior disposition of the heart more than something that can be learnt or deduced from books, even holy books.

Jesus is saying the same thing. True wisdom is found in God alone and is an interior disposition that needs to be part of you, in the same way as food is taken in and becomes part of you. Jesus claims to be the Bread of Life that alone conveys this interior life of God. It is through allowing Jesus to live in us, and for us to live in him, that the indwelling of God’s Holy Spirit is possible.

It is as we learn to allow the Spirit of God to grow within us, what Wesley called ‘holy living’ and ‘Christian perfection’, the determination to deepen one’s understanding of God and to open oneself up more and more to the power of divine love that we become agents of goodness in this world.