

1Wheatley United Reformed Church
Sunday 19 August 2012 (Year B)
I Kings 2.10-12, 3.3-14; Psalm 111; Eph.5.15-20; John 6.51-8

There's a delightful moment in *Don Quixote* when Sancho Panza, the deluded knight's squire who is more interested in his belly than in books and adventures and who has been promised the governorship of an island as a reward for his services, actually gets it. It's an elaborate hoax, but never mind. When he is installed as governor of the island of Barataria he proves, contrary to all expectations, to be rather good at the job, though constantly hungry. Though uneducated and constantly getting his words mixed up, he has a kind of peasant common-sense which enables him to judge difficult cases wisely. He would not, however, have understood this definition of wisdom which comes from the Gospel of Wikipedia, which for those of you not familiar with it, is an on-line encyclopedia, a bit like Encyclopedia Britannica only much less reliable:

Wisdom is a deep understanding and realization of people, things, events or situations, resulting in the ability to apply perceptions, judgements and actions in keeping with this understanding. It often requires control of one's emotional reactions (the "passions") so that universal principles, reason and knowledge prevail to determine one's actions. Wisdom is also the comprehension of what is true coupled with optimum judgment as to action. Synonyms include: sagacity, discernment, or insight.

So there. To be wise you need that deep understanding, that control of your emotions, which will enable you to make correct decisions or judgments. It isn't surprising, then, that King Solomon famously prayed for the gift of wisdom as he was about to begin his reign, and God gave him it, together with the riches and the honour he had not sought. His name became attached to two of the books which make up the Wisdom literature of the Bible, notably Proverbs and the Song of Songs, just as his father David's was to the Psalms. You may have heard this before:

King David and King Solomon led merry, merry lives,
with many, many concubines and many, many wives.
But when old age came over them, both of them had qualms:
King Solomon wrote the Proverbs and King David wrote the Psalms.

Not true, of course; in old age, Solomon's many, many wives and concubines - among them seven hundred of the former and three hundred of the latter, which must have been a tad exhausting - turned his heart away from the Lord to other gods, and after his death civil war divided his kingdom and it split into two, never to be reunited. We like to think that wisdom increases with age, but in Solomon's case it certainly didn't; so watch out.

The Wisdom books of the Old Testament, which also include Job and Ecclesiastes, provide an important counterbalance to the narratives of the Old Testament. They are as much a part of the Bible as the ancient myths of Genesis, or the repeated tales of slaughter and miraculous deliverance which modern critics of the faith think is proof of the absurdity of religion; they speak with many voices, now comforting, now unsettling; and we need to attend to them. They are down-to-earth and offer a series of perspectives on how we are to live in the face of so much that is unknown; indeed, unknowable. The whole range of human emotion is to be found in the Psalms, alongside all the fundamental questions we might ever want to hurl in the direction of a God who seems silent and remote. Job wrestles with the question of why good people suffer, rejects all the standard explanations and does not find an answer save in the mysteries of the creator God. Ecclesiastes takes a much more cynical, world-weary view of all human endeavours, while at the other extreme the Song of Songs is a tender, lyrical series of love poems, which for most of Jewish and Christian history have been read as a metaphor for God's love for his people.

Wisdom is what we would like to see more of from our politicians, bankers, footballers and celebrities: less spin, less self-seeking, more wisdom. But it's a gift we all long for, especially when find ourselves in difficult situations or have hard decisions to make. We usually ask 'what is the right thing to do?' or 'what is the right decision?' We don't usually ask 'what is the wise thing to do?' or 'what is the wise decision to make?' Human wisdom comes in many forms - not only from philosophers and moralists, from writers and thinkers with many different points of view, but also from

those who have reflected long on their experience of life. The Stoics of old, for example, taught the ideal of cultivating indifference to the things which happened to us and were not within our control, while practising self-knowledge, the one thing we could deal with. The Platonists taught that life as we experience is a kind of dream from which we shall one day awaken, and that the surest guide through its many perplexities was for reason to control our passions. Both these ancient philosophies were influential in the development of Christian ethics. But here's the rub. Divine wisdom does not always look like human wisdom. As Paul so eloquently and worryingly puts it, divine wisdom looks like foolishness to most people. And you do not have to be a Greek or a Jew to think that. Nor does it help that some strands of Christianity, and other faiths, seem to make a virtue out of refusing to accept what science has discovered about this and other worlds.

We talk a lot about divine love, rather less about divine wisdom. We think of Jesus as the embodiment of divine love, and yet in traditional Trinitarian theology love is the work of the Spirit, while Christ is the incarnation of wisdom: wisdom living among us, seeing our potential, knowing our pain, drinking deep of our sorrows and fears; silenced at the last by all the machinations of human power, yet alive beyond all suffering and death to those who can tune in to the still, small voice. We respond more easily to the wisdom of Jesus as he teaches and heals, opens our eyes to see the world around us differently, touches our hearts to move us to compassion. Why would you look to the Cross for its supreme expression, when the Cross is an image of terrible failure? I think that one answer to that question is that true wisdom must take account of every aspect of our shared experience, including our mortality, and the propensity of human beings to engage in unimaginable cruelty against one another. These are the things that most get in the way of any philosophy which refuses to accept that life is nasty, brutish and short and that it has no meaning at all - rather the view Ecclesiastes takes. Unless God in Christ had confronted our fears and our capacity for evil and shown that divine wisdom was stronger than they were, there could have been no saving of us from ourselves. Those who imagine that they are wise because they have

acquired power or riches are, Jesus tells us, building their house on shifting sands. Or, to use the image he does in John 6, eating perishable food. To be truly wise they need to factor not only the transient nature of such things but also the negative effect their acquisitiveness has on their brothers and sisters in the human family.

When we looked at the feeding of the five thousand a week or two back I drew attention to the debate about its meaning between Jesus and some of the participants. He insists that the true meaning of the sign does not lie in the fact that they ate their fill, but in the way it connects to a moment in the history of their salvation, when their ancestors ate manna in the wilderness as they made their way to freedom. To see beneath the surface into the meaning of things is an important element in wisdom. Now he tells them that they must eat his flesh and drink his blood, which all of us find difficult. What does this mean? Jesus uses vivid language to make his hearers think. We need to get over the literal shock of the language, because it is intended to propel us into a deeper appreciation of discipleship. He has already told us that his food and drink is to do the will of the one who has sent him (4.34). To eat his flesh and drink his blood means to participate in and be nourished by the life, death and resurrection of Christ in all that we do and are. We take his words and his deeds for our wisdom and we grow spiritually as we find ever deeper communion with him. Because we are physical beings, not disembodied spirits, called to live out our discipleship in the material world, he has given us this sign which makes the connection between matter and spirit. We eat the bread and drink the cup of his body and blood to signify our commitment to walking in his way and witnessing to his wisdom, which is always seeking to build peace and bring hope to those who have none. This is the loving wisdom of which Cardinal Newman wrote in our first hymn, that ‘when all was sin and shame, |a second Adam to the fight| and to the rescue came’; so, that as another hymn writer put it, we should be ‘rooted, grafted, built’ in Christ.

Metaphors of eating and drinking, of warriors coming to deliver, of rooting and grafting - they all point to the same truth, that the Christ who comes among us in his risen power is the one who has given himself to heal all that is broken and bring all that

is not complete to wholeness. That is his call, that is his way, that is his wisdom; and all this is given to us here, in word and sign.

I invite you to pray with me. The American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr's famous 'Serenity Prayer' was written during the Second World War. The Gospel according to Wikipedia provides the full, original version:

God, give us grace to accept with serenity
the things that cannot be changed,
Courage to change the things
which should be changed,
and the Wisdom to distinguish
the one from the other.
Living one day at a time,
Enjoying one moment at a time,
Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,
Taking, as Jesus did,
This sinful world as it is,
Not as I would have it,
Trusting that You will make all things right,
If I surrender to Your will,
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life,
And supremely happy with You forever in the next.
Amen.