

AFC 272

Song of Songs 2.8-13

Matthew 11.16-19, 25-30

5th July 2020

Wisdom – morality mixed with compassion

Minister: Let the words of my mouth

All: And the meditations of all our hearts

Minister: Be acceptable in your sight

All: O Lord, our rock, and our redeemer. Amen

The student, playing truant, was at the newsagent's counter when, by an ironic coincidence, his headmaster just happened to walk in; it was an embarrassingly tricky moment. Without flinching and quick as a flash, the headmaster said: *Ah, Simon, would you like a lift back to school.*

That head was actually my wife's father and I love that story, never one told by him, you understand, but by others who perceived in his actions that day a deep wisdom, the sort that actually enabled the student to re-assess his actions on the basis of the kindness and compassion shown to him.

What does wisdom look like?

In our gospel reading Matthew has Jesus say: *God's wisdom is proved right by its results.*

The eleventh chapter of Matthew is somewhat taken up with the pressing question of how we might recognise God, and God's servants; because it's not always obvious.

In the Christian tradition we would honour both Jesus and John the Baptist. Yet Matthew tells us here that in his day John was criticised for being too severe and Jesus for being too lax. For some God wasn't seen in either Jesus or John.

Perhaps as we read back over John's message we too sense that he was prone to be stuck in a state of permanent Advent, always waiting for God's activity yet not always sensing it when it arrived. Perhaps, towards the end of his life, his saddest one liner is when he sends his followers to Jesus asking the question (one that I think might be appropriate when interviewing any prospective minister): *are you the one, or should we look for someone else?*

The paths of John and Jesus seem to diverge at this moment. John retained his emphasis on judgement whilst in Jesus's ministry themes such as mercy, turning the other cheek and self-giving, loving service were developing.

Matthew 11 points us to the Wisdom of God expressed in the life of Jesus.

He lived with constant criticism and accusation, often resulting in rejection and eventual persecution. He could have become consumed with bitterness yet chose instead to make a wedding feast the best it could be, to sit with mothers and make time for their children, to walk away from the crowd and listen, instead, to the heartbreak of the woman at the well, and to constantly celebrate daily life with numerous meals sitting at table with both saints and sinners.

There is, and this is a theme in Matthew 11, a lightness of spirit about Jesus which was, in reality, the Wisdom of God.

By the end of this chapter we hear words that have inspired and sustained us down through the centuries: *Come to me when your load is heavy and I will give you rest, for I am gentle and humble-hearted and you'll find rest for your souls. My yoke is easy, and my load is light.*

In his day keeping the many hundreds of rules and regulations which so often surrounded religion was a heavy yoke to bear. Jesus shows us a different kind of Wisdom, one that is lighter and life-affirming.

Such a way is hinted at in those beautiful words from the Jewish Scriptures in the Song of Songs: *Rise up my beloved, for see, the winter is passed, the rains are over and the flowers appear in the countryside, the season of birdsong has come and the vine blossoms give forth their fragrance, rise up my fair one and come away.*

God's Wisdom has about it a sense of joy, love, reconciliation and the springtime of new beginnings – all of this to be experienced on cloudy as well as sunny days.

I like to think of Wisdom as a blending of morality and compassion. It sees beyond mere legalism and teaches us to value not only the letter but also the spirit of the law.

I have this idea that I've never been brave enough to suggest to a Church Meeting that our Constitution should have a water mark printed on every page that says: *Apply with Loving Kindness.*

I sense that's what St Paul does as he writes to his friend

Philemon about the runaway slave Onesimus.

Take the then laws of the state literally and Onesimus' life would probably have been finished. Yet Paul urges Philemon to interpret his morality through the prism of compassion and so accept Onesimus back, to give him a fresh start and to welcome him home, not just as a servant but also as a brother.

This was radical loving kindness, practised by Jesus and advocated by Paul. It's God's Wisdom because it sees beyond the present, or the written and it takes something of the values of the Kingdom of Heaven and makes them down to earth realities now.

I wonder in these unusual days in which we live how God's Wisdom might touch our lives and shape our thinking?

We have had to get used to so many rules over recent months. In just preparing to open the church for worship this morning, partly it has to be said because we've received separate advice from both of our parent denominations as well as the government, I have had to print out 87 pages of rules, guidance and risk assessment!

How can the Wisdom of God flavour our thinking and lift our spirits in these challenging times?

We have, of course, seen the wisdom to be grateful for the rules and advice that has come our way, recognising it's intent has been for our well-being, affording special protection for the vulnerable.

In these days maybe we've discovered the wisdom that sometimes 'less is more'. Once we opened our eyes to the

beauty of nature on an overseas holiday, now we value it in the back garden or in a walk through the park.

We've shown a collective wisdom as a community, eager to financially support the church with many of you urging us not to forget to reinstate the missed Communion Offerings later in the year so that these small mission agencies can still benefit from our giving.

There has been the wisdom that says even if we cannot be together physically we can support one another through prayer, phone calls and emails with some folk telling me it's actually in Lockdown that they've learnt more about the congregation than ever before.

We are all learning the wisdom to name the past. To express that sometimes in lament and always in a renewed spirit to walk differently into the future.

We hope to be wise enough to remember that not being with each other in recent days has felt like a bereavement and that perhaps even sitting on a committee in coming days, close to one another and engaging in dialogue, could even be seen as a joy.

Wisdom has a longer and broader view than just the present.

There has been much debate recently about statues and the wisdom of our forebears in some of the people they chose to honour.

I loved Erna's piece in a Picture of The Week article, written for our website in Lockdown, when she spoke of Maurice Harron's statue, erected in Derry in 1992 showing two figures,

from either side of the Irish divide, reaching out their arms horizontally to each other as if they were on the cusp of touching and shaking hands.

There's wisdom – I would say the Wisdom of God – expressed so profoundly in art. The Wisdom that names division but will not live by it. The Wisdom that says to grasp the hand of another can mean a thousand words. The Wisdom that shows the intention to embrace is as precious as the moment of embrace.

God's wisdom – a coming together of morality and compassion, lived by Jesus, advocated by Paul, sculpted by Maurice Harron and, with God's help, longed for and lived out in our own lives too.

May it be so, in the name of God who is all wise and all loving.
Amen