

The Way of Wisdom and Truth

The two readings which we have just had read to us together have a powerful message very relevant to our lives today – how to be wise and how to live well? If these two interconnected issues hold no interest for you then I would have to question what on earth you are doing in a church on a beautiful sunny afternoon! In fact, these are essential questions for most people whether they come to church or not. It's just that most of us do not give quite as much time to thinking about them as we should do for our own good.

How to be wise and how to live well?

The writer of the Proverbs suggests that wisdom comes from God who can provide us with both knowledge and understanding. The combination of those two qualities provide us with wisdom. The writer says, this wisdom enables us to leave behind the ways of darkness so that we can walk in the light.

In the Letter of St. John (our second reading) we are also offered guidance about how to lead a good and upright life – or to put it another way, how to make good decisions and stick to them: in short, how to nurture wisdom.

John, Jesus's beloved disciple suggests we can gain wisdom by keeping the Lord's commandments. By this he does not mean all 613 laws and commandments that we can find in the Torah of the Old Testament and not even the Ten Commandments themselves, but a single law which should govern everything else - the law of love which is the long and the short of Christian ethical guidance.

St. Augustine, the Fifth Century teacher, famously gave the ethical guidance, "Love God and do what you want" which appears fabulously straightforward but it simply shifts the question of "how do I do the right thing?" to "how do I love God?" which in a way is exactly the same question, so it does not move us forward much. But what it does do is to provide a benchmark to judge whether what we do is right or wrong. Is what I'm contemplating doing the right thing or not? Then consider if it is a loving thing to do. This is not the love of fuzzy feelings or romance, it is the love that stands up for the weak or that risks our own happiness for a greater good.

Solomon, the second king of Israel, way back in history before Christ, is presented as a paragon of wisdom. The story goes that God offered Solomon to name a gift he desired and Solomon said, as King what he wanted more than anything was wisdom. God was so pleased with his request that God granted it to Solomon and he put it to good use. So much so, that we

say of a wise person “They have the wisdom of Solomon”. We tend to forget that after he had been a king of Israel for a while he forgot his deepest wishes and his wisdom becomes tarnished: he takes for his satisfaction something in the region of 700 wives some of whom seem to have been a bit of a bad influence on him. By the time of his death, the biblical conclusion on his life and his reign as king is not that he was a very wise man, but that he turned away from God and did what was evil in God’s sight. Interestingly, the evil was not so much that he had 700 wives (though we will have our own opinion about it) but that he let some of them influence him to lead the nation badly.

What Solomon got wrong despite his original intention to seek wisdom above everything else was to lose sight of his overarching goal in life. He became distracted by wealth and power.

The critical thing for us if we want to be wise, is to ensure that we have got our **primary** goals right.

If your chief goal in life is fame, regardless of your talent to merit fame, then you will pursue it aggressively and probably be bitterly disappointed.

If your greatest intention in life is to accumulate great wealth then you will probably disregard the needs and feelings of those around you so that even if you achieve your goal you will have precious little happiness.

If your goal above everything else is popularity then the chances are that you will achieve the opposite as you will be perceived, in current parlance, as a “try-hard” which rightly is not considered to be terribly attractive.

But of course deep down, we want to be wise and we want to be seen to be wise. We can probably think of plenty of examples in our own lives where we have been less than wise in taking a course of action. But we couldn't have a better one than the young man from Luton who this week attended court to support a friend who was on trial. But after continually misbehaving in court was then seen to take a photograph of the court proceedings despite the signs saying that photography is not allowed. He was arrested immediately and brought back into the same court two hours later and sentenced to two months in prison for contempt of court. Lack of wisdom it certainly was and the young man paid a heavy price.

The lesson of Jewish and Christian scriptures of both Old and New Testaments is that when our prime objective is love of God and love of neighbour then we will receive that wisdom that enables us to make good decisions that will benefit both us and others.

It's hard to keep the prime purpose in view. We are so easily distracted by short term gains that in the end will prove harmful to us. It's hard to remember that kindness, generosity, telling

the truth or standing up for someone in need of help, will in the end be to our benefit and make us happier than if we simply feed our own unfettered desires.

During the recent riots whilst it was shocking to see the number of people willing to take to advantage of an opportunistic moment to rob a person or break into a shop and raid the contents, there were many others, not revealed till some days later, who stood up to rioters and thieves, went to the aid of people in trouble and who came onto the streets of their local community over the following days to assist shopkeepers and clean up streets. We can be inspired by the young woman in Barcelona who is so incensed by the amount of crime against tourists and others on Barcelona's streets and trains, that she carries a whistle and whenever she sees a pickpocket gang operating, alerts everyone in the area of the present danger. It's courageous and it brings the young woman no personal advantage. It's the right thing to do and it's shaming the city authorities into addressing the problem of street crime.

If we want to be wise we have to be able to see the bigger picture and to see beyond our selfish needs. There are many tough decisions to be made in life and sometimes we are paralysed by the difficulty of knowing the right thing to do.

There is a story about St. John, the author of our second lesson, when he was a very old man and on his deathbed.

Knowing that he was soon to die, he called all his close disciples to his bed. He said “Little children, I know I am about to die and there is one last thing I want to say to you: ‘Love one another’”. His disciples smiled and thanked the apostle for his word. One of their number said, “Father, is there anything else you would like to tell us before you leave us? John said “Yes there is. ‘Love each other, my children’”. The brave disciple said, “Dear Father, thank you. You have told us this many, many times and we know it is what we must do to please you and to please God but is there anything else you can tell us, that we too may have your wisdom and your faith?” St. John made a valiant effort to sit up, took a deep breath and said: “My little children, love one another. There is nothing more that needs to be said.” And with that he died.

Amen.