

Wisdom from above

St. Brandon's

Wisdom 1:16-2:1,12-22; James 3:13-4:3,7-8a; Mark 9:30-37 23rd September 2018

I wonder what your answers are to the following questions.

- What should Teresa May do next with respect to Brexit?
- Should the CofE have decided not to take on the Wonga loan book?
- What should our response, as the Church here, be to climate change?
- How do you store empty Tupperware boxes so there's always a matching lid to hand?
- What should I do with the extra day per week that I'm about to have (as I go from 5 days to 4) in the two years before I retire (apart from lying in until at least 6.30am, and doing more cycling in increasingly garish lycra)?
- How should we, as the Church here, respond to the continuing vacancy, perhaps not letting it define us, but working out our future in the light of the Deanery plan and Diocesan priorities and constraints?

Now given the collective wisdom of the assembled company, we should, I would think, be able to resolve most of these over coffee – except, of course, for the Tupperware boxes and lids problem. That has exercised some of the greatest minds of our generation without resolution.

But it's certainly wisdom, perhaps even the wisdom of Solomon, that we'd need to resolve the rest. And, of course, it's wisdom that is the main theme in our readings this morning. Slightly controversially, perhaps, we have a reading from what's known as the Wisdom of Solomon, though it almost certainly wasn't written by Solomon, and is part of the Apocrypha as far as we're concerned – in other words, not part of the canon of scripture that Protestant Churches recognise. (The wisdom of the Catholics on this is different, and it is part of their canon). Now as you'll have seen, the reading is mostly a long quotation based on what 'the ungodly' think, as a way of showing that their collective wisdom is wrong and that hence that the collective wisdom of 'the godly' is right.

But you may also have felt that there was a bit of a non-sequitur after 'no one has been known to return from Hades', why then does it continue 'Let us lie in wait for the righteous man'? And the answer is in the verses that our reading omits. Let me make the connection a bit clearer by giving you at least some of those verses: 'A passing shadow – such is our life, and there is no postponement of our end; man's fate is sealed, and none returns. [An extension of no one returning from Hades. But then:] Come then, let us enjoy the good things while we can, and make full use of the creation, with all the eagerness of youth. Let us have costly wines and perfumes to our heart's content ... Let us crown ourselves with rosebuds before they wither ... Down with the poor and honest man ... Let us tread him under foot; let us show no mercy to the widow and no reverence to the grey hairs of old age. For us let might be right!'. And hence where our reading picks it up again with the plan to have fun, and worse, with the religious types who oppose this way of thinking, and are so annoyingly certain of themselves and their destiny. 'Let's see how firmly they hold to their beliefs when insulted and tortured.'

But then, of course, the reading turns this on its head – 'Thus they reasoned, but they were led astray ... they did not know the secret purposes of God ... nor discerned the prize for blameless souls'. In other words, their wisdom was simple but wrong – given no God and nothing beyond this life, you might as well have a good time and look after No. 1, and if that involved tormenting the godly, well that was an added bonus.

This idea of 'the secret purposes of God' ties up partly with what James in our NT reading calls 'the wisdom from above'. (And just as an aside, the book of James wouldn't appear in our Bible if Martin Luther had anything to do with it – an 'epistle of straw' he called it, and even today it's relegated to the end of Lutheran Bibles.) Now James doesn't really describe this wisdom from above but talks about the very visible effects of it, and in contrast to what we might call a 'wisdom from below' that is earthly, unspiritual even devilish. This wisdom from below is a wisdom that is much like the wisdom described in our first reading and with similar effects – bitter envy and selfish ambition leading to disorder and wickedness, with cravings that can lead to murder, disputes and conflicts. A failure to so order our desires, a tendency to reason so unsoundly, that we either don't ask God for anything, or we ask for things that would not be good for us.

But notice an important difference here – our first reading was quite clear that this kind of wisdom from below was for the ungodly only. The godly weren't affected by it apparently. Now James is saying, 'Oh no! This false wisdom from below can apply just as much to the godly, just as much inside as outside of the church.' And he is presumably, as the leader of the Church in Jerusalem, speaking out of direct experience of churches where precisely this kind of behaviour had gone on. And it's exactly the behaviour which the disciples displayed in our gospel reading, where selfish ambition to be the greatest was leading to a dispute that Jesus had to quash straightaway. 'What were you arguing about on the way?', He asks almost casually, and then, 'No, no! Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' So there are very clear warnings here for any church – and therefore for us – that we cannot assume that we will be exempt from such wisdom from below and exactly those kinds of disputes and conflicts among us. We need to beware and, like Jesus, seek to recognise and quash them if and when they arise.

But that's why James contrasts that kind of self-seeking wisdom with the effects of the wisdom from above which is pure and produces peace. Indeed in a nice phrase that we might want to hold onto for next week's Harvest Festival, a 'harvest of righteousness [things being or being put right] is sown in peace' when this wisdom from above is put into effect. Let us, as a counterweight to the wisdom from below and the disputes that can lead to, pray for, pursue ourselves, encourage one another in seeking that wisdom from above with all its good effects.

But, perhaps we can say a little more than that about this wisdom from above. Because I think our gospel reading gives us another, rather different example of it. Jesus is teaching His disciples about his impending betrayal, death and resurrection. The disciples don't get it here, and when in other places they do get it, they reject it (Peter in Matthew 16:23, for example). But this is God's wisdom, this is part of 'the secret purposes of God' as our first reading put it. It reminds me of that bit from Isaiah, 'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways', says the Lord. 'For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts' (55:8-9). There is a wisdom of God which it is difficult for us to understand or obtain for ourselves.

But I don't think it's therefore not worthwhile seeking and praying for such wisdom as this. Wisdom, or at least practical wisdom, was always thought of as the highest of the virtues, as the intellectual virtue which governed all other virtues such as self-control and the pursuit of justice, as a virtue which God would give as He did to Solomon. How are we to know how to answer all those questions I posed at the beginning? Well clearly not with the envy and selfish ambition of the wisdom from below. But seeking to understand God's wisdom on all of those issues, asking God to unfold to us His secret purposes, praying for those in leadership positions to be given the wisdom of Solomon (Teresa May, Justin Welby, our SMDT and PCC, and so on), well that is surely something that we should aspire to. And understanding and then following the wisdom of God, the wisdom from above, will surely lead to a harvest of righteousness. And perhaps even to well-stacked Tupperware boxes.

Amen.