

Sermon for Sixth after Trinity, 2021

Job 42:1-6. Revelation 15:2-4. Psalm 33:8-12.
Luke 5:1-11.

The Collect: Lord, who never fails to help and govern those whom thou dost bring up in thy steadfast fear and love: keep us, we beseech thee, under the protection of thy providence, and make us to have a perpetual fear and love of thy holy name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

If I was to ask you who you think was the wisest person in the Bible, you might name Solomon as a front runner. When he came to inherit the kingdom from David, he prayed that God would give him wisdom to rule over the people (1 Kings 3:1-14). God was pleased with this request. But, later, Solomon went off the rails and married several hundred princesses in addition to numerous concubines. God had commanded him not to do so, because it would have had bad consequences. Sadly, the princesses had their own religions and Solomon built altars for their Gods, Ashtareth, Milcom, Chemosh, and Molech. Ashtareth/Astarte was a goddess of war and sexual love; Milcom was a god of fertility and storms, to which children were sacrificed; Chemosh and Molech were likewise propitiated by human sacrifice. Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, had instructed in the Torah against worshipping these other deities. He was angry with Solomon for losing his heart for Yahweh, and for disobeying the Torah. So, one might conclude that Solomon was clever, but not wise in every respect. To seek one's own gratification rather than to be obedient to God is folly, not wisdom.

Job, in our reading from the Old Testament, reflects that: 'I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.... but now my eye sees thee; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.' Despite a catalogue of personal illness and family decimation, Job had endured the criticism of younger men who tried to explain why he had suffered so much and been so stupid! But, when Job heard with his own ears, and saw God with his own eyes, he realised just how undeserving and ignorant his own pronouncements had been. Perhaps Job, in time, could be said to have had more wisdom than Solomon? Psalm 33:10 reads: 'The Lord bringeth the counsel of the nations to nought, and maketh the devices of the peoples to be of none effect.' By definition, no human can compete with God regarding whom has the greater wisdom. Yet, we do! We do! It is magnificent folly to think that we can open our mouths to attempt to prove our superiority to God. Job came to know this through suffering.

St Luke's gospel today reminds us of the time when Jesus commandeered a boat to put some distance between himself and the crowd who had come to hear him speak. As a reward for the use of the boat, he told Simon to: 'put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.' Simon knew his trade, and had been washing his nets after an unsuccessful night fishing, but agreed to do as he was instructed. Perhaps he thought it was part of Jesus' teaching, like a parable, but, whatever he imagined, it led to his recognition of his own sinful attitude (Lk 5:8) 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.' Cynicism is not the same as true wisdom. Peter had to learn to surrender his own solutions, and to seek God's ways.

We are building up a picture of what constitutes wisdom as far as examples can be found in the Bible. Some tried to be wise, but showed themselves up. Solomon - a rich, anointed king, let his appetites get the better of his brain; Job, a rich, poetic elder with a faith that could move mountains, thought that sheer determination in adversity is a way for a righteous person to demonstrate worth before God - until he saw how ignorant and sinful he was when face to face with God; Simon, a poor fisherman who knew his own job better than a preacher, realised that his attitude was sinfully wrong. Even groups of people in authority such as 'counsels of nations', consist of counsellors who make only temporary judgments. They don't fear the Lord, and think to impose their prognostications on God. That is hubris, not wisdom.

In short, people think they know better than God. Nowadays, many erroneously imagine that they *feel* more compassionate than God. They compete to be acknowledged as wise and caring. They claim to know what women need better than God does. They know what men need better than God does. They know what children need better than God does. They know what is praiseworthy and valuable better than God does. But, most, if not all, of their wisdom comes from sources found to be untrustworthy, unproductive, unfruitful, and of no lasting value. In fact, human creativity is on a knife edge; it risks tipping over into destructivity e.g. of the very earth on which we depend. As with Solomon, wisdom competes with desire for gratification. It is self against God.

The Book of Revelation tells us that 'those who had conquered the beast and its image' will stand in the presence of God singing the Song of Moses, namely, Deut. 32:1-43. They sing of the faithlessness and wickedness of Israel, but that God had relented of punishing them, and vindicated them. Also they sing the Song of the Lamb, namely 'Great and wonderful are thy deeds, O Lord God Almighty! Just and true are thy ways, O King of the Ages!... for thy judgments have been revealed.' These are songs of acknowledgment of man's folly in the face of God's wisdom.

Whilst we act as humans do, in ignorance, arrogance, sin, and half-truth, in the end God will be acknowledged for who He is. We will glimpse the truth of our own folly. We thought we could be wise in other people's eyes, when we are never more than childish and dependent. The blind lead the blind, until Jesus removes the scales from our eyes. Wisdom is glimpsed, but not owned, by those who know their need of God's forgiveness and grace.

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.