

August 19th 2018
Sermon by Revd Adrian Alker

The virtue of wisdom presents itself in three of our readings today. The Old Testament passage from 1 Kings recalls how, in a dream, a common biblical device through which God communicated with people, wise King Solomon at the outset of his reign asked God for an understanding mind to govern and to discern good from evil. The psalmist in Psalm 111 echoes the refrain heard throughout the bible: “The Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”. And in the New Testament extract from the letter to the Ephesians the writer implores his listeners, “Do not be foolish but understand what the will of the Lord is”.

Wisdom, how we wish that we employed this virtue at all times and in all places, that we always make the right call, that we consider carefully every action, every utterance, every tweet and email, every decision. I am supposing that there is no-one in church this morning who doesn't feel that they made an unwise decision at some point in their lives. There are occasions when I ask members of the congregation to turn to their neighbours and share one such memory but fear not, I am not asking that of us today since the revealing of unwise comments or actions might well be too embarrassing all round. I will however cite one example where I played it all wrong. When I was living in West Cumbria, an old university friend living in London invited me to his wedding and I made an excuse not to attend, simply because I couldn't be bothered travelling all the way on that weekend at a time when I was too busy. A very bad and unwise decision, which graciously John my friend eventually passed over for the sake of friendship.

So we all make mistakes but we are not all in positions of high office or public figures serving our country. Which brings me to cite two examples of men who have been very unwise, to say the least.

Boris Johnson's comments on the dress of Muslim women were not only unwise but dangerously inflammatory and unbelievably degrading. Whatever the truth of the affair, England cricketer Ben Stokes might now soberly reflect upon the wisdom of his actions outside a nightclub when he too is such a public figure. All those in public life, be it in parliament, government or celebrity sport, might well take heed of Solomon's humble plea for an understanding mind, as they bear great responsibility

But neither Johnson nor Stokes nor indeed most people will today be in a church, reflecting upon this 1 Kings passage or the psalm or the letter to the Ephesians. Yet like Solomon, our own monarch indeed is crowned not by her secular government but by the Archbishop of Canterbury; she is anointed as were the kings of Israel with holy oil and swears her loyalty to God. “In God We Trust” is the official motto of the United States, replacing, only in 1956, the previous unofficial motto ‘E Pluribus unum’ (‘from the many one’). So another holder of high office, the President of the USA is bound by an allegiance to a higher authority, namely God. Does then the wisdom of Solomon fill the tweets of President Trump?

And across the world in other countries and cultures rulers may affirm their allegiance to Allah and be guided by his prophet Mohammed and yet actions on the world stage may not always seem congruent with the prophet of peace.

How vital then is wisdom, a heart of understanding leading to actions, which can be seen in themselves to be both virtuous and beneficial. But if these biblical passages today cut no mustard with contemporary society, simply because we are no longer a religious or church attending nation, the larger question might be on what moral and ethical grounds do people, not least in high office, make decisions?

We know that we live in very fractious times in a country divided bitterly about Brexit, against a background of social and economic inequality, poverty for many, which drives the fear of and prejudice against immigrants. The world seems so less stable and patterns of daily living so different from a generation ago. But if we stand back a little and think about our own history in religious and secular terms has not turbulence and faction always been with us? Victorian workhouses, child labour, debauchery and drunkenness, hostility toward those of different race and religion?

Recently Christine and I spent two hours in the magnificent St Georges Hall in Liverpool, where they revealed the splendid floor of Minton tiling in the Great Hall. Not so great was a visit to the holding cells of countless prisoners awaiting trial and then execution for all manner of offences; not so great were the pictures of those declared to be drunkards and banned from the city's public houses. Not so great were the many reminders of the wealth of the city built upon the slave trade. And yet and yet, back in that Great Hall were statues of the great and the good, politicians and philanthropists, men and women like William Gladstone, Robert Peel, George Stephenson and Kitty Wilkinson who worked tirelessly in the cause of public health and the fight against uncleanness and squalor inflicted upon the poorer classes because of a lack of proper bathing facilities. We have always needed and benefited from those in office who show wisdom in public life.

Perhaps nations have always faced complex social, political and economic challenges. Wisdom has always been needed and we can look, thankfully, to those men and women, whom like Solomon have had a heart of understanding and the wherewithal to discern good from evil.

More than ever the great religions of the world need to remind people of their trust in the goodness of a divine Creator and the example of all of God's prophets in promoting peace, justice and righteousness. Perhaps there is no more urgent call to the churches than to hold before a fractious nation and some of our errant politicians and public figures the image of the Son of Man, the Good Shepherd, the One who is indeed Bread for the World, on whom we feed and who feeds us with the wisdom and love of God.

'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: those who act accordingly have a good understanding: his praise endures for ever.' (Psalm 111)

Amen to that.