

Sunday 24 July 2011: Wisdom - I Kings 3:5-12

The people of Norway and their King are discovering that the real meaning of leadership comes within a crisis. It is for such times as this that wisdom has been cultivated and in a city like ours we have already discovered its value.. King Solomon knew that too. Gibeon was a city north of Jerusalem that had Bronze Age origins. It had been in Canaanite territory before Joshua conquered it. It was fertile and known for its grape and wine production. So it's no surprise therefore to anyone that it also was a place of great religious significance. The descendants to this day of this city are known in Judaism as the Natin and they are not considered as proper Jews.

King Solomon following his father David's death seeks to bring unity to his people and to bring glory to God by building a great temple in Jerusalem. But even as his commitment to the worship of the one true God unfolds he travels to Gibeon, to the greatest of the high places where worship was offered and sacrifices made. The book of Chronicles in retelling this story actually claims that the Ark of the Covenant was kept there until the Temple was built. High Places, religious shrines, were known to be places where all sorts of gods were invoked and all sorts of religious practice ensued. I Kings 3 tells us that Solomon slept and had a dream at Gibeon where God spoke to him. This isn't most probably just nodding off in the sermon or during Choral Evensong but a spiritual practice of sleeping in a holy place which the Greeks had of to a tee in places like Delphi where they would seek an oracle from the gods. It was called 'incubation'. Despite Solomon and the biblical authors wishing to pursue the line that he was a good king devoted to the one true God, we find him to be compromised within his plural religious context.

The Book of Kings sets before us two versions of what it means to be a king. Solomon will come to be judged as to which set of values he chooses and ultimately what sort of wisdom he trusts. Our chapter today concludes with the assertion that 'all Israel heard the king's judgment and they stood in awe of him because they perceived the wisdom of God was in him' (I Kings 3:28).

Solomon at the beginning of his reign has to decide what sort of a king he will be. There is the bling king characterised by all the trappings of power, long life, money and the destruction of all your enemies. This sort of royal ideology does not confine itself to monarchy but spreads and shapes a society – we all toy with this and some still live by it but as the Arab spring has shown – it can go as quick as it comes. And then there is the kingship of service where its goal is the welfare of the people, not the glory of the king. This sort of royal ideology also spreads and does not confine itself to monarchy but moulds a way of living. Solomon will discover that these two modes of kingship will haunt him throughout his life with the blame for the eventual division of the nation into two kingdoms falling at Solomon's door because he is unable to shake off the pull towards being the bling king, shunning God's wisdom.

These are ways of living that still challenge us not only in life but even in death. So Michael Mayne, the former Dean of Westminster quotes a story about a funeral. On 1 April 1989 the funeral took place in St Stephen's Cathedral Vienna. It was the funeral of Empress Zita of Austria/Hungary, the widow of the last Emperor Charles I who had died 70 years before. She was 96. The service lasted two hours; 6000 people attended; the setting was Mozart's Requiem Mass; at the end the coffin was placed in a hearse drawn by six black horses and accompanied by 600 Tyrolean militia to the nearby Habsburg burial place, the church of the Capuchins. When the cortege arrived the doors were closed. The chamberlain knocked three times and one of the friars inside called out; 'who requests entry?' The reply was formidable: 'Her Majesty Zita, Empress of Austria, crowned Queen of Hungary, Queen of Bohemia, Dalmatia, Croatia, Slavonia, Galizia, Illyria, Queen of Jerusalem, Archduchess of Austria, Grand Duchess of Tuscany and Cracow, Duchess of Lorraine, Salzburg, Carinthia, Krain and Buconia, Grand Duchess of Transylvania, Marchioness of Moravia, Duchess of Upper and Lower Silesia, of Modena, Parma,

Piacenza, of Dubrovnik and Zara, princely Countess of Habsburg and Tyrol, Duchess of Trent and Brixen, Marchioness of Upper and Lower Lausitz and Istria, Countess of Hohenembo, Ruler of Triestse, great Princess of Serbia, born royal Princess of Bourbon, Princess of Parma; there then followed her orders which were not modest. The friar replied 'We do not know her. Who requires entry?' Her majesty Zita, Empress of Austria, Queen of Hungary'. Again the reply came, 'We do not know her. Who requires entry? This time the chamberlain replied, 'Our sister Zita, a poor mortal sinner. The gates were thrown open. (Quoted in Michael Mayne, Learning to Dance, DLT, 2001, p165).

Bling King or Servant King becomes the question for Solomon's life. But despite that he does start off from an admirable place because he starts with a question in his dream as he sleeps in Gibeon. He says 'I am only a child.... give me an understanding mind? Despite pedigree and status, despite the moral kudos of being part of king David's family who the press of his day declared to be a good king, despite his existing capacity to be a leader demonstrated in his massive building project in Jerusalem, he acknowledges his smallness and he asks in an intriguing Hebrew phrase for literally a hearing heart, or as one bible translates it - a heart with a skill to listen. The heart in the Old Testament is the place of thought and will. He is asking for Godly wisdom which the New Testament goes on to explain is often illogical, counter intuitive and very often foolish. God's wisdom is a gift freely given but dependent on our ability to have the kind of openness which suggests we are still learning; that we are not immutable and that we might even have things we still need to learn.

Today's gospel collection of parables makes the point. No sane farmer would ever plant mustard seed and leave it to grow so big as to harbour pesky birds who could damage your crops but in God's eyes, this is a wise way to proceed because even weeds have a place in the economy of heaven and generous hospitality pips other potential understandings of what a good yield might look like. Or a dealer who knows the value of things, who understands what the market will pay, on discovering a great pearl sells everything in order to buy it – hardly cautious business acumen. I remember telling that parable as a godly play story with a group of teachers where room by room the merchant laboriously removes every item from his home until the house is completely empty so that there is resource to buy the pearl. The parable is only two lines long but it takes as much as 15 minutes to tell the godly play version as he divests himself of all his stuff in order to get the pearl. That school was in the run-up to an Ofsted inspection and despite the work and stress which still had to be undertaken, the teachers went back to their classrooms fully aware of their deeper vocation.

This is God's foolish wisdom which despite leaving us scratching our heads makes us want more and gives us longing to shift our allegiance more to that world which has enduring and life affirming quality. It begins with a willingness to seek wisdom, to engage with a movement towards humility. It depends on recognising our need for grace, for growth and for the kind of wisdom which is folly to those claiming to be wise. Like Solomon it starts with a question needing answers.

Leonard Cohen, the American singer summed it up like this : ' Ring the bells that still can ring , Forget your perfect offering, There is a crack, a crack in everything - That's how the light gets in. That's how the light gets in.

Or as that other great thinker Spike Milligan is reputed to have said- "Blessed are the cracked, for they let in the light"

Canon David Monteith