

Wisdom

Proverbs 9:1-6; Ephesians 5:15-20

The word 'wisdom' is mentioned 222 times in the Old Testament. It was regarded as one of the highest virtues among the ancient people of Israel along with kindness and justice. The Old Testament books of Proverbs and Psalms each urge readers to obtain and to increase in wisdom. But within that context of kindness and justice. What is wisdom if it is not kind and just? These three virtues are woven inextricably together.

The Hebrew word for wisdom is a feminine noun.

*Wisdom has built **her** house,*

***she** has set up her seven pillars.*

***She** has slaughtered her beasts, she has mixed her wine,*

***She** has also set her table.*

***She** has sent out her maids to call*

from the highest places in the town,

"Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!"

*To him who is without sense **she** says,*

"Come, eat of my bread

and drink of the wine I have mixed.

Wisdom is a place to live and find shelter and sustenance. Wisdom is a place to do with knowledge and imagination, discipline and piety, order and moral instruction. Wisdom is not only facts and figures, Wisdom is attitude and practice, and application and interpretation, a way of life and a respect for the Divine. Wisdom shapes and creates, like an architect designing and building the world. Wisdom is generous and hospitable and prepares a feast at which the people of the world can be fed. And at that table, what can be learned is this:

"The fear (or respect and reverence) of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight."

On a day with two baptisms, wherever you find yourself standing with God and the Church, this concept of wisdom as something to be built and offered, something that nourishes and guides, is a big idea. It makes me wonder about what it is that those who have the gift of children in their lives want to pass on to them: parents and grandparents; friends and teachers; people in a congregation who have responded, “We do” to the baptismal question:

Do you welcome Rosa and Louis

And do you renew your commitment, with God’s help, to live before all God’s children in a kindly and Christian way, and to share with them the knowledge and love of Christ.

We do

“Share with them the knowledge and love of Christ.” Share with them your experience of life; not to cottonwool them away from existence and the rough and smooth things that give life its meaning, the good and the bad; but the experience that says, ‘try this way, not that way; look at these options, and here is what they might mean.’ The experience that is brave enough to love children and let them go, but always to be ready with welcome and non-judgemental care if they need to come back. Wise enough **not** to fill them with all our answers to life, but to help them find places where they can learn for themselves. Open enough with them about what we believe and the difference it makes to how we live our lives, and what we make, and do not make, of God and the Divine and ‘Beyond’, and honest enough to invite them into that belief and model the good things that it has meant to us, and the questions about it with which we still struggle. That is the great wisdom of faith – not to have all the answers, but to acknowledge all the questions, and not to be anxious about what we don’t know, but to be thankful for what we do know.

All that wisdom to offer to the children. I am reminded of a time I was with my 5-year-old godson (he’s now 26 and has two degrees), and I was putting him through some spelling tests for those useful Primary One words like rhododendron, and rhythm, and onomatopoeia, and he put his head into his little hands and said, “Godfather Derek, my head is too full.”

I suppose there is a Wisdom in knowing when to stop, as well as when to start. When to create space, and when to open new ideas. When to offer the wisdom of literature, or art, or science, or practical hands-on experience, or music. Wisdom comes in many forms, and its keys unlock many doors. In Ephesians Paul tells us to look how we walk, not unwisely but with wisdom. Not to be foolish but to understand what it is that God might be revealing to us with this insight, or that. To be filled with God's Spirit, which is another name for Wisdom, and when the rhetoric and disputation run out, turn to psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, *"singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart."* There is something that happens when we sing our faith. Another window is opened into our soul and experiences of God and other emotions and thoughts filter in, and our understanding is deepened and shaped and enhanced. When God gives us the map to Wisdom, there are many routes which will lead us through different realities and experiences. Is this what God, through the figure of Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs, offers to us as example? In the seven pillared house Wisdom builds – she provides shelter and protection; at the table Wisdom spreads before her guests, she provides nourishment and nurture. Is this what God, through the figure of Wisdom, wants us to emulate when we engage with the children and women and men in our lives? A tolerant, gracious, inclusive, generous sharing of what we value, and what we believe, and what we love?

Wisdom: what we pass on to the next generation, and the generation beyond that. Wisdom, the gift we give to children.

What wisdom is being passed on to children in the bereft homes of Israel-Palestine, or Iran, or Ukraine, or Russia? What wisdom was passed on to the children who last week were sentenced for violent disorder and looting in the streets of some of our cities and towns? What wisdom is it

that chants, 'send back the boats'? or, 'we have earned the right to retaliation'? Not God's wisdom. Not God's wisdom.

In 1939 Richard and David Attenborough, who grew into men of colossal stature in the worlds of drama and biology, were growing up in Leicester. Their parents had offered refuge to a number of Jewish children escaping from Germany, on their way to the United States. When war was declared, two Jewish girls were staying with them. They realized that they would now be unable to cross the Atlantic. What was to be done?

The Attenboroughs decided that they would offer the girls a home for the duration of the war, but they felt that it was a decision that could only be made as a family. Richard described how his parents called him and his two brothers into the study and told them the situation. They explained that the two girls, Helga and Irene, were Jewish. Their parents had been sent to concentration camps and were unlikely to survive. The girls had no one to care for them and nowhere to go. The Attenborough parents said to their boys, "We want to adopt the girls. We think it is the right thing to do. But we will only do it if you agree. It will call for sacrifices. We were a family of five. Now we will be a family of seven. There will be things we won't be able to afford. There will be things you'll have to share. One of those will be love. You know how much we love you. But now you will have to share that love with Helga and Irene. We will have to show them special affection, because you have a family, but now they have no one at all." The boys agreed.

Many decades later Richard Attenborough described it as the most important day of his life. Through the wisdom of his parents, he had been invited to join them in an act of courage and generosity.ⁱⁱ

Not all of us will face tests like that, but the wisdom of this story tells us something important. “It is not the things we buy our children that shape their lives, it is the values we give them and the way we invite them to be our partners in building a better world.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The poet William Wordsworth wrote,

“What we have loved,

Others will love, and we will teach them how...”^{iv}

We will teach, we will share, we will model, we will offer wisdom. We’ll speak it and draw it; we’ll make it and sing it. We’ll point it out in books and nature and drama and sport. We’ll reveal it in the searching stories of Jesus and the practical compassion of churches like this one. We’ll demonstrate it in the relationship God wishes to have with everyone. We’ll build a house and prepare a banquet. And through our wisdom, which comes from God, we will offer grace, and faith, and love.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ *Proverbs 9:10*

ⁱⁱ *Jonathan Sacks, Celebrating Life, pps 105-106*

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid*

^{iv} *William Wordsworth, Lyrical Ballads*