

GAINING WISDOM

1 Kings 3. 5-12

Romans 8. 26-39

Matthew 13. 31-33, 44-52

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

I would like to start by sharing a story with you. It goes like this.

A happy and cheerful man once captured a bird and placed it in a cage. ‘Give me my freedom sir!’ cried the bird as he shut the door. Startled that the bird was talking to him, the man listened as it continued. ‘I am no use to you sir, for I have no beautiful feathers to look at nor am I able to sing beautiful songs, and I am too small to eat. If however, you promise to grant me my freedom I will tell you three wise teachings.’

The man agreed, whereupon the little bird told him: ‘First: Do not grieve over things that have already happened. Second: Do not wish for that which is unattainable. Third: Do not believe in that which cannot be possible.’

‘Indeed, these are wise things you have taught me’ said the man. As agreed, he opened the door of the cage and set the little bird free. The man sat and pondered the bird’s sayings, and the bird flew up to a branch high up in a tree. After a few moments the man heard the bird laughing. ‘Why do you laugh?’ he called.

‘Because I so easily won my freedom’ replied the bird. ‘You humans pride yourselves on being the wisest of the creatures, yet I a tiny bird, have outwitted you. Within my belly lies a diamond the size of a hen’s egg. If you had not let me go you would be a wealthy man.’

Upon hearing this news our once happy and cheerful man became angry, sad and depressed. And the more the little bird laughed the angrier, sadder and more depressed the man became.

After some time, the man started hurling abuse at the laughing bird as he attempted to recapture it. But to no avail. The little bird was always beyond his reach. Finally the little bird called out. 'Listen to me O human. When you granted me freedom I gave you three teachings, yet you almost instantly forgot them. You should not grieve over things that have already happened, but still you are grieving that you gave me my freedom. You should not wish for things that you cannot obtain, and yet you want me, for whom freedom is my whole life, to voluntarily enter a prison. You should not believe that which is impossible, and yet you believe that I am carrying about inside my body a diamond as large as a hen's egg, although I myself am only half the size of a hen's egg.'

And with that the little bird flew away.

This story reminds us, does it not, of how 'unwise' we often are, and how unwisely we often act.

Our appointed Old Testament lesson tells us another story, this time a true story, about a very wise man. King Solomon's fame is legendary. Most modern readers of the Bible know, as the ancient reader also did, that his reign was long and exceedingly prosperous; and Solomon is particularly well-known for his great wisdom. Who would have thought that the second son of Bathsheba would go so far? Bathsheba, as you will remember, was the beautiful woman whom King David saw bathing as he stood on the roof of his palace; and David married her after he killed her husband, Uriah the Hittite. Solomon was Bathsheba's second son; and he rose to the throne

even though he had competition from some of David's other sons¹ who were older than he was.

We do not know how old Solomon was when he ascended to the throne; but we are told that one of the first things that he did as king was to enter into an alliance with Egypt; and as part of the bargain he married the Pharaoh's daughter. While this was undoubtedly a very smart political move, it is a bit surprising on Solomon's part, given that the Hebrew scriptures forbade any intermarriage with foreigners² and that Egypt was known to be a historic oppressor of Israel.

Not to be deterred, Solomon brought his bride to Jerusalem, where he had delayed the building of the Temple until his own house was built. The Bible also tells us that while the Jews were waiting for the Temple to be built in the City of David, they were offering sacrifices in what were called 'the high places', which is a subtle reference to sites of pagan worship. This is a second element that surprises us as we come to Solomon's story: although we are told that he loved the Lord and walked in the statutes of his father David, Solomon sacrificed and offered incense at the high places rather than going to worship in Jerusalem, where the ark of the covenant was located.

We see, therefore, that Solomon was like all of us, in that he had his own imperfections. He had his good qualities and his bad qualities; yet in spite of the latter, God appears to him in a dream and invites him to make a request. God takes the initiative and comes to Solomon with an open invitation.

We have to give Solomon credit. He had his priorities right, at least, and did not ask God for worldly attainments for himself. Rather, in his petition, we see that Solomon first acknowledges God's grace to him and recognises that he is undeserving of God's

¹ For example, Kileab (2 Sam 3. 1-6), Adonijah (1 Kgs 11-31) and others (2 Sam 3. 1-6).

² Cf. Deut 7. 3-4; see also Josh 23. 11-13 and 2 Kgs 8. 18.

special favour. He then asks for God's gift of wisdom so that he can carry out his duty as ruler of God's people, the chosen ones. Acknowledging that Solomon has a right attitude, God grants Solomon's wish, and even goes so far to grant other benefits to Solomon that he did not explicitly request. Because Solomon sought the kingdom of God, all these things were added unto him. Even though Solomon was imperfect, God showed his great and steadfast love to him.

It is interesting to note that when Solomon asks God for wisdom, he literally asks for 'an understanding mind' to rightly govern and judge. And in the initial Hebrew rendering of that verse, the words for 'an understanding mind' might better be translated as 'a listening heart'. For those of us who seek wisdom today, we might do well to think about those words: what does it mean to have 'a listening heart'?

You might say that there are three kinds of listening that we need to practise:

Firstly, we need to listen to God. Yes, God does want to speak to us, and he does so in a number of ways; but primarily he speaks to us through Scripture. In the Bible, he tells us what he has done for us so that our faith will be stronger; and he tells us what he wants of us so that our lives might be better. If any of us feel that God has not been communicating with us lately, it is not because he is dead or silent; it is perhaps because we have not been listening. A lack of listening is the main cause of spiritual stagnation that we sometimes experience. Many of us have stopped listening to God. Let us re-learn to read the Scriptures, and to take to heart what we read; and let us continue to use prayer as an opportunity to receive wisdom from our God.

A second kind of listening that we need to practice is listening to one another. I wonder if you have ever heard the story told by Mark Twain, the American author. He wrote, 'when I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished

at how much he had learned in seven years.’ Of course, it was not that at all, but the young Mark Twain had learned to listen. How good are we at listening to one another, in church, at home, and elsewhere? It is not just a question of listening to what people say; it is also a question of listening to *how* they say it, because the way in which people say things tells us so much. Or how many of us have found ourselves switching off during a conversation, so that five minutes later we cannot actually remember what we’ve been told, because we have not been listening? Learning to listen to one another, even people with whom we disagree, is important. It is helpful to remember that sometimes ‘listening can be a greater service than speaking’.

Thirdly, I would suggest that we need to listen to the world. The contemporary world around us is reverberating with cries of anger, frustration and pain; and too often, we turn a deaf ear to these anguished voices. Do we know what bothers people in our street? Do we know what makes our friends or colleagues angry, or what makes them hurt? Do we know the issues that are facing the geographical parishes in which we live? Before we can make the gospel relevant to the world, we need to listen to the world, as it were. We need to listen to people who are hurting and angry; to people who are frustrated; to those who are suffering; and to those who are around us. Then we can speak of the gospel and live out the gospel in a way that will speak to others.

The world is searching for wisdom, understanding, and discernment. Many people do not realise that this intrinsic desire is present within them. Some of them spend their entire lives searching for something they cannot even explain, and much less experience.

Some have tended to think that wisdom and knowledge are interchangeable; and that these two terms describe the same thing. But they do not. Wisdom is different to knowledge; and the presence of knowledge does not ensure the presence of wisdom.

The good news is that those of us who desire wisdom may ask God to give it to us, just as Solomon did. In his epistle in the New Testament, James encourages us by writing, 'If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you' (1. 7). Solomon asked God for a listening heart, 'a heart with ears', a heart that would hear the voice of God, the voices of other people, and the needs of the world.

Today, as we come to God and ask him for wisdom, may God enable us to have discerning and listening hearts that listen to him, to others and to the world.

Amen.