

ME or WE?

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.

‘Me or We?’

It’s a question that each one of us faces and answers every day as we say our prayers, make decisions, establish priorities and live our lives. Are we going to live as selfish and isolated individuals, or as people who are connected to God and interdependent with others? The word ‘Me’ does not just apply to individuals; ‘Me’ could be a group of people, a parish or a business. So ‘Me or We?’ is also a choice that can be made by denominational churches, industries and even nations.

‘Me or We?’ is the question that Solomon faced when the Lord came to him in a dream and said, ‘Ask what I should give to you’. Put like that, it sounds like a great deal. It sounds like God has signed a blank cheque and given it to Solomon. All he has to do is to fill in the amount.

But it’s not that simple. God’s question to Solomon poses a dilemma; and his answer will carry profound consequences. Solomon must decide between asking for himself or asking for the larger ‘we’, of which he is also a part.

When God asked this generous question, Solomon was at the crucial beginnings of his kingship and was looking to consolidate his position. You see, there had been problems: Solomon was not the heir apparent to the throne. It should have gone to David’s eldest living son, Adonijah. But the prophet Nathan and Bathsheba (Solomon’s mother) convinced a dying David to proclaim Solomon’s right to be

king¹ of Israel and Judah. After this shaky start, Solomon surprisingly married the daughter of the Pharaoh of Egypt, the Hebrews' historical enemy, thinking that such an alliance would give him political legitimacy. And although the scriptures relate that Solomon loved the Lord, we are told that while waiting for the Temple in Jerusalem to be built, Solomon made his offerings to God in what were called the 'high places' outside the city. Such places were not ideal, to say the least, because it was there that offerings to pagan deities were also made.²

Yes, poor Solomon is feeling vulnerable and needs reassurance and comfort. God's question to him represents an amazing opportunity. Any other young king like Solomon would have asked for material wealth, military power and a long, continued reign.

But Solomon delivers a remarkable reply to God's generosity. He says, 'Give your servant...an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil'. Some Bible translations render 'an understanding mind' as 'a listening heart'.³ Solomon knows that a listening heart⁴ and an understanding mind are more valuable than other traditional signs of kingship.

Someone has said, 'Wisdom is a quality of mind, a way of looking at life. It is to see life both horizontally and vertically. As we look deeper, we see that all life is connected to everything else and that in turn causes us to take in more – to see more widely. Wisdom requires that we arrange what we observe and know, and create meaning from it. It is integrative thinking that guides and directs our life.'

¹ Solomon was the last monarch to reign over the united kingdom, Israel (north) and Judah (south).

² Prior to the construction of the temple in Jerusalem, high places were acceptable places of worship. But Solomon later built high places for his wives' foreign gods and, in fact, made sacrifices there himself.

³ In Hebrew thought, the heart was the centre of both the mind and the will.

⁴ The Hebrew words help unpack the richness in Solomon's response. In Hebrew, the word 'to listen' is the same word for 'to obey'.

I suspect that we know a wise person when we see one. But we may not be so clear on how we can become wise.

What does it take to make a person wise? Solomon teaches us that we must go to God and ask for those qualities. Elsewhere in the Bible, in the epistle of James, we are told, 'If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you' (1. 5).

In the end, Solomon recognised that a 'Me' attitude could not sustain the kingdom. His concern was for the kingdom – for the 'We' – and not for himself. He made the crucial shift from 'Me' to 'We'.

Now what does that shift look like? And what does a 'We' life look like?

- A 'Me' life is one of power, domination and control. A 'We' life is one of vulnerability, intimacy and self-giving.
- A 'Me' life is characterised by rhetoric, frenzied reaction and isolation. A 'We' life is characterised by silence, stillness and presence.
- A 'Me' life is filled with doubt, cynicism and fear. A 'We' life is filled with faith, hope and love.
- A 'Me' life clings tightly to the past. A 'We' life embodies what might be.
- A 'Me' life draws lines that divide. A 'We' life draws circles that encompass.

In my experience, making the shift from 'Me' to 'We' is not easy. It means that we have to abandon many of our automatic or natural reflexes. It means that we can no longer be simply focussed on ourselves, our circumstances, our agenda and our plans for our future. It means that we have to redirect our attention to a future that wants to *emerge* in and through us; and that emerging future is the kingdom of heaven.

Solomon chose a 'We' attitude. He asked for a listening heart, a heart with ears, a heart that would hear the pain of the world, the needs of the people and the voice of God. He did not ask for himself long life, riches or even the defeat of his enemy. And it pleased the Lord.

That is not, however, where the story ends. Several verses after the end of today's text you will read, 'Then Solomon awoke; it had been a dream' (3. 15). It was all a dream. Yes, it was a dream, but it was not just a dream.

That it was a dream doesn't mean it wasn't real; and it doesn't mean that Solomon's waking was the end of the dream. To the contrary, his awaking was the beginning of a new reality. He awoke to a new possibility, for himself and for his people. That reality and possibility would be realised every time Solomon chose 'We' over 'Me', every time he lived the dream.

Our lives and our world desperately need a new reality and a new possibility. God has entrusted each of us with Solomon's dream; and it is well past time to wake up and go live the dream. So what will it be? You tell me. Each one of us must decide. Will it be 'We' or 'Me'?

Amen.