

Wise Advice

Readings: 1Kings 3:3-14; Philippians 2:3-11

Since the election I am sure that you have all been given lots of advice.

Politicians get advice from all quarters whether it is from those who are paid for it, or indeed pay to give it; from the learned opinionated pieces ...sorry, opinion pieces in the press, letters to the editor or shouts, slogans, and gesticulations from the madding crowd. Everyone wants to give you their advice.

As George Burns memorably said, "Too bad that all the people who really know how to run the country are busy driving taxi cabs and cutting hair."

But it has always been thus. What is needed is more advice but wise advice. Here is some advice that a mother gave her son, a certain King Lemuel.

- ² "O my son, O son of my womb,
O son of my vows,
³ do not spend your strength on women,
your vigor on those who ruin kings.
- ⁴ "It is not for kings, O Lemuel—
not for kings to drink wine,
not for rulers to crave beer,
⁵ lest they drink and forget what the law decrees,
and deprive all the oppressed of their rights.
⁶ Give beer to those who are perishing,
wine to those who are in anguish;
⁷ let them drink and forget their poverty
and remember their misery no more.
- ⁸ "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves,
for the rights of all who are destitute.
⁹ Speak up and judge fairly;
defend the rights of the poor and needy."

There are a number of surprising things about this advice. Firstly it sounds quite modern with its call for justice and upholding the rights of the oppressed despite being over two and half thousand years old when Lemuel was a king in Arabia. Secondly, and sadly, how often this long standing warning about inappropriate relationships and the dangers of alcohol has been ignored. I was going to list a few politicians who have come a cropper on these matters but this is supposed to be a short address. It is enough to say that it is not only sports stars who have succumbed to wine, women and song (or martinis, men and shopping for gender balance). If only they had listened to Lemuel's mother and probably their own as well!

The other surprising thing is the source of this ancient quote, it comes from the Bible, in the Book of Proverbs (31:1-9), in what is known as the Wisdom Literature.

Whilst many think of the Bible as full of "do"s and "don't"s there is a great deal given over to "think about this", to the gaining of wisdom, of the importance of wisdom: the art of how to live successfully in this world. As Parliament restarts, it is here I would suggest that we look for truly wise advice.

WISDOM

There were no elections in ancient Israel but there were political machinations aplenty. Solomon had successfully usurped his older half brother Adonijah and now sat on the throne of his father, David, King over all Israel.

As he started his reign he prayed, which I should say is a good start, but it is what he prays for which is interesting. He recognises that if he is to be a successful leader of the nation what he needs above all is wisdom, understanding to govern the people, to be able discern good from evil.

I hope that this would be your prayer. This would be my prayer for you and I am sure the prayer of all my clerical colleagues here today, that you would have wisdom.

Certainly it is what Tasmania needs. We do not need smart politicians, crafty politicians, retail politicians (whatever they are), popular politicians. We may or may not need more politicians, but we do need wise politicians. Wise leaders who will care for the people they represent and manage the resources both financial and natural that have been entrusted to them.

This is always true but the need for wisdom is paramount in the delicate political balance which the election outcome has given us. To see the value and priority of wisdom is wise advice.

But what does such wisdom look like?

WISDOM IN LISTENING

God answered Solomon's prayer and in a celebrated case where he has to decide who is the real mother of an infant child his great wisdom is demonstrated. He goes on to be the great example and exponent of wisdom, the proverbial "Wisdom of Solomon" and in books which bear his stamp, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, that wisdom is passed on

There are many facets to what is taught about the nature of wisdom, but a highly prized virtue is that of listening. So Proverbs 12:15 says:

¹⁵ The way of a fool seems right to him,
but a wise man listens to advice.

The comedian Bill Cosby once said "A word to the wise ain't necessary, it's the stupid ones who need the advice." Whilst this may be funny, it somewhat misses the point. "The stupid", or in Biblical language "the fool" wouldn't listen to advice that is what makes them a fool, whilst the wise will be keen to hear. At least one prominent politician may have been better insulated from disaster if he had listened more carefully to advice.

A reflection of the importance of listening is seen in the way that Biblical Wisdom takes good advice where it finds it. There are portions which seem to have been copied from Egypt, or other surrounding nations, like the portion which I read earlier from Lemuel's mother.

I hope you will all be people who listen to and seek good advice from wherever it can be found. I hope that this may include listening to representatives of the Church as we share our understanding on issues of public interest and importance.

It will also of course mean listening to each other, parliamentary colleagues and political foes alike. Particularly in the current arrangements simply spouting party lines without true dialogue will be unhelpful and ultimately foolish. Proverbs 18:13

¹³ He who answers before listening—
that is his folly and his shame.

Now of course listening to advice does not mean having to follow it, nor does dialogue mean having to agree. Difficult decisions will need to be made about which path to take and wisdom may give contradictory answers. After all many hands make

light work, while too many cooks spoil the broth. Wisdom is then not a text book for right answers but give the tools for the art of decision making. There may be times when having listened that you are unsure how to respond. It is well to remember Proverbs 17:28

²⁸ Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent,
and discerning if he holds his tongue.

To learn the art of listening, of speaking and of being silent is wise advice.

ETHICS AND WISDOM IN THE REAL WORLD.

One of the interesting things about the Wisdom Literature is that it can seem a bit more interested in real politic, than being really pious. There are verses about bribing and there is Lemuel's mum's advice about letting the suffering drowning their sorrows. Ecclesiastes goes as far as "So I commend the enjoyment of life, because nothing is better for a man under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad." (8:15)

There is a certain earthiness to biblical Wisdom Literature and this may be something some religious folk need to remember and learn but this does not mean that it doesn't have an ethical centre. Recognition of reality does not mean that corruption is condoned so Proverbs 20:17

¹⁷ Food gained by fraud tastes sweet to a man,
but he ends up with a mouth full of gravel.

Furthermore unlike the wisdom of other Ancient Nations which could be more like "How to win friends and influence people" biblical wisdom sought to establish justice and righteousness, equality and fairness into the society. The book of Proverbs starts by saying that its contents are for teaching how to do what is right and fair and just.

Remember again the words of Lemuel's mother to her ruler son.

⁸ "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves,
for the rights of all who are destitute.

⁹ Speak up and judge fairly;
defend the rights of the poor and needy."

When these things are not in the forefront of leader's minds we are more likely to end up with scandals like those that have rocked UK politics over expenses.

These are words that rightly should be before you as you wisely represent those who have given you the responsibilities that you now have. To remember the priority of justice and mercy, this is wise advice.

WISDOM AND GOD

The earthiness of Wisdom Literature does not mean that God is ignored. In fact the repeated refrain of wisdom is "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom" The wisdom in which one is to live in this world is founded upon the recognition of the maker of the world. This recognition of our dependence on God is that we will be well equipped to have the humility to listen to others. It is in recognition of God's just and loving nature that we are best inspired to care for the needy and disadvantaged in our society.

But the wisdom of God did not remain simply in the Scriptures. In the New Testament Jesus clearly speaks as a sage, a wise man. He uses stories and sayings to get people to consider their ways and change their lives. He particularly gives wise advice in relation to pride and hypocrisy, - be invited to the important seats rather than taken them for yourself. He also calls on and demonstrates care for the oppressed and

disadvantaged. But more than that, Jesus does not speak like a prophet with the language of "Thus says the Lord" but speaks like Wisdom itself. For Jesus is no mere wise man, he is the wisdom of God come to us in person. As Jesus himself said "one greater than Solomon is here" (Matthew 12:42)

The wisdom which he shows us is quite different from what some may think of as wisdom. Our world seems to encourage us to do things out of selfish ambition. Many through the ages and around the world continue to use their positions of authority for their own advantage

Yet Jesus shows that the truly wise path is one of giving humble service. Despite who he was, the Wisdom of God and the Son of God, Jesus did not use that to his advantage but Jesus gave himself for us, served us in dying for us so that we may know the extent of God's love and care. And the resurrection is God's vindication of that path and vocation. The resurrection of Jesus is God's tick of approval on such sacrificial wisdom that Jesus shows and calls us to follow.

To see it this way means the call to service is far more than wise advice, it is to follow in the way of God himself which can be the foundation for a new more caring society.

If you want my advice, may we all listen to the wisdom of God's word.

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