

9 July 2017

The surprising wisdom of God

Matthew 11.16-19, 25-30

Zechariah 9.9-12

We are currently living in what some people have called the ‘knowledge economy’ – we live in a world where so-called knowledge is king. Those who will succeed are those who are best able to handle and manage all of the information that we have available to us. We have constant access to all sorts of knowledge – and our children are growing up in a world in which it is extremely easy to access information.

Our seven year old grandson will say, “Nanny do you know ... ?” – and he will ask some obscure question normally about rugby that Nanny is meant to know. But when Nanny replies, “No Stan, I don’t know about that,” his immediate reply is, “Well, Nanny, you could always google it on your phone.”

Stan has already learned that knowledge is quite literally at our fingertips.

The American anthropologist and film-maker Elizabeth Kapu’uwailani Lindsay has commented about our western society.

We live in a society bloated with data yet starved for wisdom. We're connected 24/7, yet anxiety, fear, depression and loneliness is at an all-time high. We must course-correct.

We have an excess of knowledge and data ... and yet we lack wisdom.

In our knowledge-obesity we have forgotten what Socrates, the Greek philosopher taught us many, many years ago.

“The only true wisdom is knowing you know nothing.”

Which will inevitably mean that search for wisdom is somewhat elusive, and it is very different to the search for knowledge. Deep down we know that it is one thing to be clever, it is another thing to be wise.

In searching for quotes about wisdom for this morning’s sermon I found a somewhat unlikely source for a quote. Amid all of the philosophers, thinkers, statesmen, novelists and poets, there was a quote from the former Irish rugby

union player Brian O’Driscoll. It is a quote explaining the difference between knowledge and wisdom.

Knowledge is knowing that a tomato is a fruit.

Wisdom is knowing not to put it in a fruit salad.

In our gospel reading today we find Jesus addressing this theme of wisdom.

Having told the parable of children playing the market-place, and commenting on how people responded to John the Baptist and to Jesus himself, he says in v 19:

“But wisdom is proved right (or justified) by her actions.”

A clear indication that he is addressing the theme of true wisdom.

And then his comment in v25 touches on the theme of wisdom again:

“I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.”

This time a dig at the supposed ‘wise and learned’ of the time.

And then even in the final statement, which doesn’t mention ‘the wise’ or ‘wisdom’, Jesus is taking up themes that were very firmly part and parcel of the Jewish nation’s discussions about wisdom. Jesus said.

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart,

and you will find rest for your souls.”

There is a body of Jewish literature which brings together some writings which are dated to the period after the writing of the Old Testament and before the writing of the New Testament. These books are sometimes collected together in a part of the bible called ‘*The Apocrypha*’. (Most bibles don’t contain these books, but some do.)

Within these books there is a book known as the *Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach* (sometimes also entitled *Ecclesiasticus*).

Here are some his words – notice how similar they sound to the words of Jesus:

“Listen, my son, accept my judgment ...

Put your feet in wisdom’s fetters
and your neck into her yoke ...

once you have grasped her never let her go.

In the end you will find the relief she offers ...” (Ecclus 6.23-28)

And then again:

“Come to me you who need instruction,
and lodge in my house of learning ...

bend your neck to the yoke ...

See for yourselves how little were my labours

compared with the great peace I have found.” (Ecclus 51.23-27)

In these sayings as in the saying of Jesus there is an invitation to come, there is the instruction to put on a yoke, and there is the promise of peace. Surely Jesus must have had these sayings in mind when he offered his own invitation.

So we have three sayings here about wisdom. And all of them speak of the surprising nature of God’s wisdom.

The first of these sayings reminds us that God’s wisdom is wisdom of the heart before it is wisdom of the head.

Jesus has been talking about John the Baptist after some of John’s disciples had asked him, “Are you the one who was to come or should we expect someone else?”

And he ends up by reflecting on the stark contrast between his own ministry and that of John the Baptist, and how many people had responded to neither of them.

And he sets up this scene of children playing in a village square, perhaps. And first of all they play at weddings, with one of them playing a flute and the others joining in the dance.

And then they turn to playing at funerals, and they sing the sad songs of the mourners.

It’s quite possible that the boys played at weddings, because it was the men who traditionally danced at weddings; and the girls played at funerals – because it was the women who sang the songs of mourning.

But here is the scene in the village square of these children playing these games ... but although the other children get into the mood and join in, whether dancing or wailing ... the adults ignore them and get on with the grown up stuff.

“We played a flute for you and you did not dance,
we sang a dirge and you did not mourn.”

Now, I have to admit that I probably would have been with the other adults in the square ... especially when it came to the dancing! Not my thing at all!

At the induction of Ruth Moriarty yesterday afternoon at Christ Church, New Southgate and Friern Barnet, the sermon was preached by Israel Olofinjana, the minister of Woolwich Central Baptist Church. He began the sermon by playing the jazz track, ‘London is the place to be’ and he said, “If you want to, feel free to get up and move while it is playing.”

And while Israel gently moved around to the rhythm of the music at the front, most of the congregation were like me – sitting firmly in their seats – “We’re British, we’re in church, we’re not going to move around just because someone has told us we can.” But I wouldn’t have been doing it, even if we were in a jazz club.

But Jesus uses this playful scene to highlight the contrast between his own ministry and the ministry of John the Baptist.

John the Baptist came all serious, singing a dirge – calling people to mourn over their past failures – living a sober, frugal life – and many refused to join him – ‘He has a demon.’

And then Jesus came – the polar opposite – the bridegroom leading the wedding dance – eating and drinking in celebration of the kingdom ... and still they refused to join in – ‘He’s a glutton and a drunkard.’

But many did, of course. They caught the mood music of John ... and then the very different mood music of Jesus and recognised in the mood music of their lives the rhythm of the beat of God’s heart ... and their feet got tapping and they got up and joined in with the song of the kingdom.

‘Wisdom is proved right by her actions,’ added Jesus ...

And there is something in all of this that is saying that the wisdom of God is the wisdom of the heart before it is the wisdom of the head.

Response to children playing, response to music – whether it be dirge or dance – is a response of the heart –

And those who responded first of all to John with his particular ministry, and then to Jesus with his very different style of living, responded because they allowed their hearts to be attuned to the melody of their lives. They felt the need to mourn with John over our failure; but they also captured the mood of celebration, the joy of singing freedom's song, in the ministry of Jesus.

Khalil Gibran, the poet, wrote this:

Keep me away from the wisdom which does not cry,
the philosophy which does not laugh
and the greatness which does not bow before children.

The wisdom of God is never a detached wisdom, because it is the wisdom of love – it is the wisdom that cares, it is the wisdom that puts a greater emphasis on emotional intelligence than intellectual cleverness.

The wisdom of God is wisdom of the heart, before it is wisdom of the head. It is wisdom with passion and wisdom with empathetic engagement with God.

But then we discover that this wisdom is wisdom that is gifted, rather than wisdom that is achieved.

Jesus prays to God a prayer of thanksgiving.

“I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.”

Now this turns conventional wisdom on its head ... because conventional wisdom tells us that wisdom is something that you only acquire with age and experience.

This last week the Chelsea defender and former England player, John Terry transferred to Aston Villa. Terry is now 36 years old and didn't make many starts for Chelsea last season. He is no longer at the top of his game.

But the Championship side Aston Villa will be delighted to have him, despite the fact that he is getting towards the end of his playing career. They will be hoping

that the kind of experience that John Terry brings the dressing room will inspire and motivate the other players.

And in defence, he may be slower than he once was (and Terry has never been the fastest of players), they will be hoping that the way he reads the game will mean that he will be one step ahead of the other players.

Aston Villa are investing, in part, in his footballing experience and wisdom.

He may be somewhat slower and have less stamina than a 20 year old rising star, but his footballing nous and wisdom will make up for all of that.

But we all know that conventional wisdom sometimes gets things wrong.

The conventional wisdom of the political commentators failed to predict first Brexit, then Trump, and then the resurgence of Jeremy Corbyn.

And the conventional wisdom of Jesus' day, had Jesus labelled as a 'glutton and a drunkard.'

By giving him this label they are treating him like a rebellious son. In Deuteronomy 21.18-21 there is a law which lays down what parents should do when their son rebels. The parent should take their son to the elders at the gate and say, "This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is profligate and a drunkard."

And the punishment laid down, is that the son should be stoned to death.

Potentially this is a serious charge against Jesus ... and we know what eventually happened to him.

But children ... and many other 'little ones' ... caught on to what Jesus was about. They understood that Jesus was embodying the life of the kingdom of God –

- they recognised his welcome as the welcome of God
- they saw in his healings signs of God's promise of wholeness and freedom

They might not have been the 'learned and the wise', but they had grasped with open hands and open hearts the wisdom of God.

And Jesus says that it is because this wisdom – this insight into who God is and what God is like, and what life in his family is all about – is always a wisdom that

is gifted to us by God. Never something achieved by us. Never something earned by us. Never something acquired through diligence or study.

We don't achieve this insight by our own cleverness, by the passing of the years, by the gaining of experience – but because in Jesus, God reveals his heart to us, and shares his wisdom with us.

And even the most experienced Christian only ever has any insight into the surprising wisdom of God as a gift – through coming to God with the openness and wonder of the child.

Now we mustn't misunderstand what Jesus says here.

God doesn't randomly choose to reveal his wisdom to some and hide his wisdom from others.

He doesn't say to himself, 'Ooh, let's have some fun! I'll let this funny looking one over here have a bit of insight. But I don't like the look of that boring one. I'll hide myself.'

It's much more a question of 'there's none so blind as them that will not see.'

God's wisdom is hidden from some, because they close their hearts to the surprising wisdom of God – preferring their own version of wisdom and insight.

Because Jesus' invitation to share in God's surprising wisdom is opened out to all:

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

And this is the final element here of the surprising wisdom of God.

The wisdom of God is the wisdom of gentleness and humility.

"Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."

Conventional wisdom tells us that we want a strong leader.

Theresa May thought that she could win the last election on the basis of promising 'strong and stable leadership.'

Many churches, when they are looking for a minister, will say that they are looking for someone who will be a 'strong leader.' When it comes down to it what they mean is that they want a strong leader who will lead us where we

want to go ... and if anyone tries to be a strong leader leading us where we don't want to go, woe betide that leader.

The strength that Jesus offers is the strength of gentleness and humility.

He is the donkey-riding King of Zechariah's prophecy, offering himself as the wisdom that the world longs for, the wisdom that alone will give rest to a weary world.

The myth that has dominated the whole of human history in one form or another is the myth of redemptive violence.

This myth tells us that the problems of human history can be solved only through redemptive violence.

This myth has taken a number of forms:

- all sacrificial systems are based on this myth – that God needs a show of violence to restore order to the world
- criminal justice systems have been created on the basis of this myth. That human failings have to be met with some form of punishment in order to satisfy a system of justice
- and international relations are all built upon the assumption that in the last resort we will turn to violence and war in order to sort out differences between us.

Jesus by his life and his death, challenges the myth of redemptive violence.

Jesus offers hope and peace to the world, a restoring of the order of the world and a re-ordering of our lives, not through redemptive violence, but through its opposite, redemptive suffering.

This is the new surprising wisdom that Jesus brings into our world and into our lives.