

The wisdom of Solomon

Picture the scene: In the middle of the tenth century BC, the ancient kingdom of Israel is at its height. It is prosperous and secure – the envy of the nations around it. In the palace, the king is surrounded by all the trappings of a wealthy kingdom. His throne is covered with ivory and overlaid with gold.

Two women – two prostitutes – come before the king to seek judgement. Each has recently given birth in the same house, but one of the babies has been accidentally smothered. Each woman claims the remaining child as her own, and there is no way to prove which woman was the child's mother.

The king considers the situation. He calls for a sword, and then makes his judgement known. He gives the order: "Cut the living child in two and give half to one and half to the other."

One mother doesn't contest the ruling, and she declares that if she cannot have the baby then neither of them can, but the other begs the king, "Give the baby to her, just don't kill him!"

The king declares the second woman the true mother, as he says a mother would even give up her baby if that was necessary to save its life, and awards her custody. This judgment becomes known across the whole kingdom and is considered an example of the king's profound wisdom throughout the land.

The king was Solomon. He was only the third king of the ancient nation of Israel, and he would also turn out to be the second-last king of all Israel. In many ways he is seen as the greatest king.

In Jesus' time, Solomon was still the example of worldly glory and wealth and splendour. You might remember that in Matthew's gospel Jesus says "And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.

Not even Solomon. To Jesus' listeners, Solomon was unimaginably wealthy.

During Solomon's reign, the temple was constructed, and following the temple, he constructed other important buildings in Jerusalem, established a royal palace, rebuilt other cities in Israel, founded the port of Ezion-Geber.

Solomon was wildly successful – until he wasn't.

David had named Solomon as his heir and successor – and he'd said to him:

"I am about to go the way of all the earth," he said. "So be strong, act like a man, and observe what the Lord your God requires: Walk in obedience to him, and keep his

decrees and commands, his laws and regulations, as written in the Law of Moses. Do this so that you may prosper in all you do and wherever you go” (1 Kings 2:2-3).

Then, in the lead up to today’s reading from 1 Kings, verses 1-4 of Chapter 3, we learn how Solomon married the Pharaoh’s daughter to cement an alliance with Egypt, and went to the city of David until he’d finished major constructions in Jerusalem – the temple, the palace and the wall around Jerusalem.

And while all this construction going on, people were offering their sacrifices to God on the hilltops, the “high places”.

Solomon himself went to one of the high places, the hilltop at Gibeon, about ten kilometres from Jerusalem to offer his sacrifices, and his sacrifices were very generous – a thousand burnt offerings. (3:4)

That would have been a day or more of sacrifices and worship, with crowds of attendants and followers and priests assisting, and likely drummers and trumpeters too. But after that, things would have quietened down, they would have gone back to their tents. And finally, at Gibeon, Solomon went to sleep.

And that night, as we heard at the beginning of today’s reading, the Lord came to Solomon in a dream.

And God said to the new king, “Ask for whatever you want me to give you”.

It’s the stuff of fantasy fiction - whether it’s by a fairy Godmother, or a genie appearing from a lamp, or indeed from the devil himself.

It’s a great plot device. We can all relate to it!

I think most people have thought about it from time to time. If you could have anything, what would it be?

Here in 1 Kings, God himself offers Solomon whatever he wants. Solomon’s a young king. A young king of a small and fragile nation. A king of a court which has a track record of intrigue and infighting and betrayal.

A king of a nation with some powerful – but not always friendly - neighbours.

There are an awful lot of things Solomon could have asked for – good things. Security in its various forms – a mighty army or strong walls, perhaps. Or the defeat of the neighbouring nations. Or the death of all his foes in his own nation!

Or he could have asked for wealth. Or a long life for himself.

But he didn’t ask for any of those things.

When God said to him, “Ask for whatever you want me to give you.” Solomon responded, but he didn’t blurt out an answer, instead, he put his request in context: “You have

shown great kindness to your servant, my father David, because he was faithful to you and righteous and upright in heart. You have continued this great kindness to him and have given him a son to sit on his throne this very day.”

God had been kind to David. We know that David wasn't always a model king (or a model follower of God for that matter), but he'd always turned back to God. Through it all, God was faithful to David.

And God's faithfulness to David extended to having his chosen heir, Solomon, become king.

And then in this dream, Solomon admitted his own frailty: “And now, O Lord my God,” he says, “Now, Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number.” (3:7-8)

Solomon knew that being king of Israel was going to be a tough job. And after all, there'd only been two kings before him, so having a kingdom was quite new to the Israelites as well.

How was Solomon going to lead and rule his people? He was only young, not quite a 'little child' - but the consensus is he was 18, 19 or 20 at the time - who didn't know how to run a kingdom. Being king was a daunting prospect – an overwhelming one.

But Solomon turned to God, with his request for the thing he wanted more than anything else – verse 9: “...so give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?”

He asked for a discerning heart to govern. Or in the Good News translation “Give me the wisdom I need to rule your people”. He asked God to help him do what he had to do... what he was called to do.

He didn't want wealth or power – although I guess as king of Israel, he had those things already. Instead of asking for wealth or power, he asked God for wisdom, for understanding, for discernment. He asked for the ability, to do his job well. To fulfil his calling as the king – and as a servant of God.

Solomon's answer pleased God: Verses 11-12 “So God said to him, “Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be.”

Solomon's request was granted. He would have a wise and discerning mind. He would be a great and understanding and discerning king. And there would be no one like him again.

What does it mean to have a wise and discerning mind? We have that example of the judgement over the two women with the baby to think about. On the face of it, it's an unpleasant story – an accidental suffering, a king who seems prepared to cut a baby in half and one woman who's quite prepared to let him do that.

Solomon breaks the deadlock between the two women. He finds the truth. And then he acts on the truth.

I think that's the essence of having a discerning mind – it's about finding the truth, even when finding the truth is hard to do, and then acting on that truth. The classic example is smoking cigarettes – how many people in our society know that smoking is harmful to their health? All of them. How many people in our society smoke cigarettes anyway?

How many people in our society know that if you play the poker machines, you will lose more than you win? How many play anyway? I couldn't find the number of players, but I can tell you that people lost \$2.27 billion on poker machines in the first quarter of 2026.

Some people will say that some of that \$2.27 billion went to taxes and good cause... but would a discerning person that made it okay? If we are truly wise and discerning people, what do we do when we hear things like that? Do we act on our knowledge?

So that's two vices... but what about good things? Well, if you study the markets, you might be able to find a good investment or two... which might be good – but if you don't act on what you've found, what is the benefit?

And we heard in our gospel reading today several parables about the kingdom of heaven. We heard that the kingdom of heaven is:

Like a mustard seed,

Like yeast ,

Like treasure hidden in a field,

Like a merchant looking for pearls,

And like a fishing net.

Jesus asked the disciples if they'd understood what he was saying, and they said 'Yes', and he went on to tell them that there was a consequence to that understanding – "Therefore every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old."

It wasn't – isn't – enough to hear and even understand things about the kingdom of heaven, the disciples – and us – need to act on them.

We're faced with choices in all sorts of things every day. Some are frivolous. Some are important. Some are critical.

If we were confronted by God's offer today, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you" What would our choice be? How would we respond? As individuals? As a church?

He has, of course, given each of us the sure and certain hope of life in him through the death and resurrection of Jesus, but it's easy to forget that and to come up with lists of things we'd like. We'd like financial security. We'd like good health and long life. We'd like our children and grandchildren happy. We'd like them to be successful.

And as a congregation, what would we like? More people in church on a Sunday morning? More money in the offertory?

Would we ask for those things? Or would we ask for wisdom?

As Solomon put it "give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong,"

Would we make the same choice?

I suspect that we won't be confronted by God in a dream with the offer "Ask what I should give you," – but you never know, it might happen. But the offer is there in a way, for us - what is it that we pray for?

Do we pray for things we'd like?

Do we pray for success? Wealth?

Do we pray for health and security?

Do we pray for our congregation to grow?

Or do we pray for God's wisdom?

All those other things are okay to want and to pray for, but if we have our priorities right, we should be asking for wisdom – and other things will flow from that.

After all, as Jesus said (Matt 6:33) "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you."

We should ask God for his wisdom, his guidance. Even, perhaps, in asking what we should be praying for.

Will God answer our prayers? The apostle John wrote "If we ask anything according to his will, he hears us." (1 John 5:14). So he always hears, and I've heard the suggestion

that God always answers prayer.... But that sometimes the answer is “Not yet” – and sometimes the answer is ‘No.’

What is it that we will ask God for today? Do we ask for his wisdom? Do we seek first the kingdom of God? Will we make a wise choice?

In all of this, I wonder how much wisdom young Solomon had to start with. The young king faced an uncertain future, and there were threats all around. But he didn’t ask for safety or success... and in asking God for wisdom, perhaps Solomon made the wisest choice of his life.

Sometimes I think our own prayers are answered even before we pray them. I think Solomon’s was.

Let’s always pray for God’s wisdom in our church and in our lives.

Amen.