

Sermon – ‘...it had been a dream.’

Solomon is a revered figure in our sacred literature. Across Judaism, Christianity and Islam, he is acknowledged as a renowned leader and a faithful servant of the most-high...most of the time.

This morning's reading helps establish Solomon's credentials for us: described as a person who 'loved God', Solomon is also a shrewd politician (marrying Pharaoh's daughter) and working to centralize and modernize Jewish worship. But he and the people are still stuck in some old ways. Worshipping at 'high places' – having taken over old shrines since there was no temple. There is (perhaps) a worry that the people will eventually fall back into old, destructive habits. Until Solomon has a dream.

Dreams are a powerful and often mis-understood pathway for divine inspiration. Hebrew Scripture is full of examples: Abraham, Jacob, Joseph – these are the ones we remember – but Solomon too is prone to these nocturnal encounters with the Holy presence. Abraham goes off on a journey – Jacob wrestles God to a draw – Joseph brags himself into slavery – but Solomon is different. Solomon dreams his way into legendary leadership.

It's a rare individual who, when confronted with the invitation to ask God for anything, makes a request that benefits everyone. This is why Solomon is still a topic of conversation, and why he became an icon of wisdom.

Solomon approaches God in the best possible way. In humility. "I am only a child..." "I don't know anything..." "You were good to my father (in spite of everything) – please give me the ability to lead your people." Give me an understanding mind, says Solomon – offering his uncertainty and his deepest fears to God – and God offers even more.

Make no mistake. There are those who imagine that this humble approach is the quickest path to riches and success – for, after all, wasn't Solomon also widely recognized as incredibly wealthy? But his humility was not a tool to manipulate God – his humility seems genuine. His desire was for the best interest of all his subjects. His hope was that the glory of God would be best revealed in a well managed, prosperous, faithful nation. He wants, above all else, to be a good leader.

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While Solomon’s story is fun to tell, it might feel like there’s not much here to benefit us. We are not looking to lead a nation. And we no longer imagine that God plays particular favourites where leaders of nations are concerned (remember, Solomon and his subjects imagined themselves THE CHOSEN PEOPLE – to the exclusion of all the rest). How can this ancient dream do us any earthly good?”

Well, it seems to me that a little of Solomon’s humility – a little of Solomon’s desire for the good of all and the glory of God – would not be such a bad idea right now.

No – sensible people do not imagine that God favours them over others; and no, our leaders in public life are no longer considered ‘chosen by God,’ - but wouldn’t it be nice if more leaders and sensible people claimed Solomon’s prayer for themselves? “God, give your servant therefore **an understanding mind** to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil”

Not the ability to ‘choose the right side’ or to win folks with my charm. Not the power of twisted religious loyalty to drive my programs forward; ***an understanding mind.***

The key to Solomon’s wisdom may be this humble desire for understanding – a pathway that requires listening and reasoning, and which generates empathy and compassion. Understanding is the key to relationship with your friend, your neighbour, your ally, or your enemy. Knowing is not enough. Acknowledging differences and finding common ground is all well and good, but an understanding between friends (or foes) can change the relationship...and almost always, for the better.

Lately, when conversations get prickly and tempers frayed, I’ve been trying to get myself to ask a particular question into the chaos: ‘Help me understand...’

Help me know what it is that convinces you. Help me to see your side (rather than trying to lure me/bully me/shame me to your way of thinking) It doesn’t always work – and sometimes, it’s easier to stop talking than it is to start listening – but understanding (of the kind Solomon desired) **REQUIRES US TO KEEP LISTENING.**

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It is the first act of compassion. It is the first step on the road to reconciliation.

It is not easy, this desire for understanding. It works best if it is a shared pursuit. Jesus' crucifixion was inevitable partly because those in power had no desire to understand what he was all about. Even so, as those who would follow Jesus, the burden falls to us. And if everyone were to take that responsibility – if our leaders, our politicians, our clergy, our councillors - were to be overcome by a desire to understand those whom they serve, wouldn't the kingdom come a little closer?