

Last Sunday I preached on the Old Testament story of when the Lord appears to the new King Solomon in a dream and told him to ask for whatever he needed, and how Solomon asked for wisdom.

In that sermon I focused on the theme of what each of us would ask for if the Lord came to us in that same way, but after the service a parishioner came up to me (I think it was Mary Girling) and she thanked me for the sermon but said that she wished I had talked a bit about what wisdom is.

I, like all clergy, am always desperately looking for sermon ideas, so I decided then and there that today I would do just that; follow up on last week's sermon with one titled, "Reflections on godly wisdom from someone who doesn't necessary have much." So first, I'd like to talk about wisdom and the Bible.

Scripture likes to associate great themes with great people: Faith is associated with Abraham, Law with Moses, Music with David, Wisdom is associated with Solomon. These associations should not be taken too literally. For example many of the "Psalms of David" include historical references to events with occurred hundreds of years after David's time. But there was something about these people that tied them to these great themes, and that leads me to what I want you to know. Wisdom is one of the great themes of the Bible.

For example I have a book on my shelves called "Old Testament Wisdom" which covers books like Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes the Wisdom of Solomon, and so on. These books are known as the Wisdom literature of the Bible.

Wisdom is described in the Wisdom of Solomon as "a breath of the power of God ... She is a reflection of the eternal light ... an image of his goodness."

Thus wisdom is used as something like an image of God. However, with that said, most of the wisdom material in the Bible is organized into short wise sayings, such as "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," and "raise a child up in the way that they should go, and when they are old they shall not depart from it."

That first quote is a peculiar one to we modern people because we don't really believe in fear based religion. But if you bear in mind that in the ancient world thunder was viewed as either a battle going on in heaven or the stomping around of an angry God, you can understand why people saw fearing God as a virtue; it might just keep you alive.

But, what continues to be true about the phrase, "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," is that wisdom begins with humility. Ancient people feared the Lord because of a power in balance between their need for a good crop and their perception that God controlled the rain.

So today, I might rephrase that saying with something like this, “Humility before God is the beginning of wisdom”, and that’s just as true today as it was 3,000 years ago.

The New Testament is also filled with wisdom sayings, such as “Judge not, lest you be judged,” “Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and his righteousness and all these things will be added to you as well,” and, of course, The Golden Rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

St. Paul even goes so far as to say in 1 Corinthians “to those who are called....Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom.”

So in the Bible, wisdom is abstractly presented as an image of God and for Christians, Jesus is the wisdom of God. More concretely wisdom in the Bible comes to us in the form of short wise sayings.

Throughout Christian history, wisdom has been seen as a fruit of those who have committed themselves to prayer and spiritual growth. Sometimes monks and nuns, sometimes those who seem to “have it.”

Another book I found on my shelves is titled, “The Wisdom of the Desert” about the men and women in early Christianity who withdrew to live in solitude in the desert outside Egypt in order to devote themselves to prayer. This book shows that wisdom continued to find expression in short sayings or stories that make some wise point.

So now, allow me to offer a few reflections of what I think I know about wisdom. First, wisdom, I think, involves a deep understanding of what is truly important. For example, if someone comes to me very upset because of a financial crisis, I find that the thing which is upsetting them is not as important as the thing that will calm them down, which is an understanding that God will provide and that our worst fears almost never happen. Wisdom understands what is truly and ultimately important.

Second, wisdom, I think, involves an understanding of how we relate to everything and everyone around us based on what is truly important. For example, if God’s love and care for me is ultimately important, then God’s love and care for you is also ultimately important, which means that it is not necessary for me to run around trying to control people and events, it is only important for me to imitate God’s love and care, so knowing what is important changes how I relate to others.

Third, wisdom, I think, involves some insight into the cause and effect relationships in our lives. How things happen and why they happen a certain way. We all have lots of repetitive cycles in our lives; some good and some quite frustrating. When we look at the frustrating repetitive cycles in our lives, we will grow in wisdom as we learn to see how our behaviors and feelings contribute to guaranteeing each repetition.

I have come to an understanding in my own life that spiritual growth is neither purely linear or cyclical. Spiritual growth works like a cycle until we learn the thing God wants us to learn and

then we get to move forward. Then we have a new cycle until we learn the next thing we need to learn, then we get to move forward. So, if there's an area of your life where you feel like you're simply going round and round, ask God to show you what you need to learn in order to change the cycle.

Lastly, but perhaps most importantly, wisdom, I think, involves these two (point to ears) and these two (point to eyes) more than this one (point to mouth). It seems to me that the learning of wisdom has a lot to do with listening and watching, and very little to do with talking, especially if talking is focused on one's opinions.

Godly wisdom is an inexhaustible topic really. But the point for Christians is to take Jesus as our primary example of wisdom, and to always engage in a process of learning what is truly important, how what is truly important impacts all our relationships, and how through listening and watching we can learn about how things happen and about spiritual growth in our lives. Amen