

Sermon preached in St Alkmund's Church, Whitchurch, on 23 July 2023 (Trinity VII)

We've heard two very different readings this evening, but there might be a common theme in the idea of wisdom.

In the first reading (1 Kings, chapter 2, verses 10-12 and chapter 3, verses 16-end) we heard about King Solomon. In the previous verses God had offered to grant Solomon whatever he asked for, and he asked for wisdom. God was pleased and said that since Solomon had not asked for riches and honour, but rather for wisdom, he would give Solomon not only wisdom, but also riches and honour.

Then follows the story of the two women, each of whom gave birth to a baby. One child died. Both mothers claimed to be the mother of the surviving child, so Solomon proposed to cut the surviving child in two and give half to each mother. One mother thought that this was a good idea. The other mother said that the child should be given alive to the other mother. Clearly she was the real mother, and Solomon gave her the child.

That incidence showed Solomon's wisdom and 'all Israel' were in awe of his wisdom. One can see in him a certain insight to distinguish a false witness from a true one. He seems to have been quick witted rather than having a capacity for deep thought and wisdom. Certainly the record of his reign doesn't show that he was all that wise.

In the second reading (Acts, chapter 4, verses 1-22) Peter and John had healed a lame man in the name of Jesus Christ. Words from the King James Bible have always stayed in my mind about the healing. Peter said to the lame man 'Silver and gold have I none; but such as I have give I thee: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk'. And so the man did.

People were deeply impressed and many joined the infant Christian church, but there was also opposition. Peter and John were taken before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court. This court was very powerful. Its leaders worked with the Roman authorities and their decisions could be backed by the Roman army. The dominant party in the Sanhedrin were the Sadducees, who did not believe in resurrection. It was this court, almost certainly the same people, who had not very long before found Jesus guilty, and now here were two men who claimed to have healed a man in the name of the same Jesus of Nazareth.

Peter defended their actions in a very powerful speech, and the Jewish leaders were quite clearly angered at his fluency and confidence. They were also embarrassed that the lame man was present in court, undoubtedly healed. They sent Peter and John outside so that they could decide what to do. They decided to give a solemn warning. Peter and John were called back into court and ordered not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. Peter and John stood their ground. God, they said, had commanded them to speak in the name of Jesus about all that Jesus had done and taught. They could not stop doing that. The court threatened Peter and John, but in the end they had to let them go without punishment because of the positive support which Peter and John had from the general public.

I love the Book of Acts, from which this account comes. We read in it of the very early years of the Christian church, beginning in Jerusalem and then spreading through Asia Minor and the Mediterranean to Rome. The Book of Acts has been called the Gospel of the Holy Spirit, and there are several references in it to people bring 'filled with the Holy Spirit'. Indeed when Peter gave his defence before the Sanhedrin in tonight's reading St Luke, the author of Acts, describes Peter as 'filled with the Holy Spirit'. The Jewish leaders were astonished at his boldness and they referred to

Peter and John as ‘unlearned and ignorant men’. After all, they were fishermen from Galilee in the north of Palestine – real provincials to the educated elite of Jerusalem.

But what is wisdom? Solomon had a common sense approach to a particular problem, but I’m not sure that it was an example of great wisdom. But Peter in his boldness was filled with the Holy Spirit and, inspired by God, he spoke true wisdom. Through that wisdom the early church grew and prospered. May we in our time be led by the Holy Spirit to speak wisdom, to speak the truth, to a country and world where it is needed so much.

William Price