

Sermon for Evensong on 23rd July 2017, Sixth after Trinity

1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:16-28 - The Wisdom of Solomon

I'm always a bit nonplussed about the Wisdom of Solomon. Faced with two harlots and a baby, and a pretty awful story about a dead baby as well, and an allegation that a baby had been switched in the maternity ward, he has to decide whose baby is the live one.

It's why when you're in hospital they always give you a tag. But in Solomon's day they didn't have plastic tags and bar-codes. Instead they had - swords! If in doubt, Excalibur to the rescue. If you read the chapter in 1 Kings that comes before our lesson, Solomon was busy establishing his authority after he had succeeded his father David, the great King David, as king of Israel. He had a challenge from his brother Adonijah, who wanted to marry Abishag, the most beautiful woman in Israel, who had been found and brought to King David in his old age 'to lie with him and warm him up', because he was getting old and felt the cold - stay with me on this - but there was no hanky-panky: as the Authorised Version puts it, so decorously:

3So they sought for a fair damsel throughout all the coasts of Israel, and found Abishag a Shunammite, and brought her to the king.

4And the damsel was very fair, and cherished the king, and ministered to him: but the king knew her not. [1 Kings 1]

You must read the story - Solomon's elder brother Adonijah, who had previously started to act as though he was the crown prince, due to inherit the kingdom, who had been disinherited by King David just before he died, craftily asked his mother Bathsheba to ask Solomon for permission for him to marry Abishag - which Solomon took as a challenge, because Abishag was the king's widow.

Solomon used the sword again - he had his brother killed, and indeed there is quite a trail of carnage at the beginning of the First Book of Kings. Chopping the baby in half was part of Wise Solomon's standard procedure, which had a lot in common with George W. Bush's 'shock and awe' strategy in Iraq.

You might object that I'm being rather unfair to Solomon, not giving him full credit for finding a very clever solution to a very tricky dilemma. His use of ultra-violence as a method of governing, I suppose strictly speaking, could be said to be irrelevant to the question whether he was really wise or not.

Or maybe not: imagine the Judgment of Solomon in a world without capital punishment, where 'thou shalt not kill' certainly means something where babies at least are concerned - a world like ours. What would Solomon have

had to threaten, in order for the real mother to give herself away, to reveal her mother's love rather than have the baby harmed? It might not have worked, today.

How should a wise leader behave? How should a judge decide? Look at the dilemma that the Sadducees, and then Annas and Caiaphas, the people that the Bible calls their 'rulers, the elders, and scribes', the leaders of Israel in Jesus' time, look at the dilemma which they faced as a result of the Apostles Peter and John, who had healed a man who had been crippled from birth, preaching the gospel of Christ's resurrection and attracting a crowd of 5,000 listeners - which must have been a huge phenomenon in those days - and generally getting the ordinary people very excited.

The Jewish leaders' dilemma was what to do about the Apostles. On one level, they posed a threat to public order: they were challenging one of the Sadducees' beliefs, that there cannot be a resurrection from the dead. The Apostles' teaching was a message of hope - hope which the Sadducees and scribes didn't have. On the one hand the leaders could not deny that a miracle of healing had just taken place: but on the other hand, at the same time, the Apostles' preaching was not like the old traditional Jewish teaching, but it was something new and radical - and they sensed that their authority as High Priests and scribes was being called into question.

Fortunately they had moved on from Solomon's favoured solution. No sword-play. They just threw the Apostles into prison overnight, to keep them off the street. And they didn't get far in trying to shut the Apostles up. Why would they, why should the Apostles, have listened? Here's the story, from Acts 4.

18And they called them, and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus.

19But Peter and John answered and said unto them, Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye.

20For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.

21So when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding nothing how they might punish them, because of the people: for all men glorified God for that which was done.

Put yourself in the position of those Sadducees. What would you have done in their shoes? They weren't bad people - they weren't, say, evil people claiming to do things for religious reasons, like Islamic State, Daesh. The Jewish Law that they upheld told them - the Ten Commandments told them - to love God and love their neighbour, just in the same way, on the face of things, that the Christians, the Apostles Peter and John, were teaching. But the problem was one of authority and authenticity. By performing miracles of

healing, the Apostles were, in effect, saying that they were more in touch with God than the High Priest.

We have a similar problem today. If you are a leader, an MP or a government minister, or a local councillor, how do you decide what is good to do? If you are a judge - say, the judge hearing the terribly difficult case of little Charlie Gard, or Sir Martin Moore-Bick enquiring into the terrible fire at Grenfell Tower - what principles will you apply?

So far as the judges are concerned, obviously the simple answer is that they will apply the law, the law of the land. We have 'the rule of law' - 'Be you ever so high, the law is above you,' was Lord Denning's version.

But as the residents of Grenfell who survived have so forcefully said, it's not so simple. And indeed so far as little Charlie Gard is concerned, there may be a fundamental difference between what the parents think should be the principle to be applied, namely that they, the parents, should have the final say, and what the law says, which is that what is judged by the court to be in the best interests of the child should be the determining principle.

Who is right? How to decide 'who is the baby's real mother', to put it in Solomon's terms, in these cases? These are not just - or maybe not even really at all - questions of law. And anyway, the law comes from somewhere. What principles are the basis, the foundation, for our laws? For instance, a lot of law is said to be derived from the principles of 'human rights'. But where are those rights derived from?

As Christians, we have a position to take in this. Just as Peter and John refused to be silenced by the authorities, we should not shut up if we see something which is wrong, which is against God's holy law, for fear of being accused of being 'political'. Some of you have said to me sometimes how relieved you have been when you think that my sermon hasn't been 'political'. I must, gently - but definitely - disagree with you about that. A Christian preacher must be political. Let me explain why.

Our leaders, our political leaders, try, I'm sure, always to do the right thing. Good leaders always try to have in mind principles which they can point to, recognised principles that the majority of people - in a democracy - can agree with. So here in England we would all agree with the principle of freedom of speech, for example. But in addition we, as Christians, base our morality on Jesus' 'new commandment' of love, that we love each other as He has loved us.

So what about foreign aid? Is it better, from a moral point of view, to give £1m to a project in Africa or £1m to a similar project in England? What principles

should our leaders use in order to decide? Are English people somehow more deserving than African ones? If so, why?

What if it isn't overseas aid, but refugees and migrants? Is an African or Syrian refugee more or less entitled to a roof over their head here than someone who was born here? Again, why? What principle would you use to justify your answer?

And when you've assessed that, what do you think that would Jesus say, what would He say about your conclusion and your reasons?

I think that it is a perfectly legitimate exercise - and indeed that it's an exercise that we in the church ought to do all the time - to look at the policies of our rulers and try to subject them to the light of Christ. Doing that means that we really do have something valuable to say.

As I've been saying now for a couple of Sundays, and I'll go on saying, one of this church's vision objectives, adopted by our PCC, is for us to get out and become more involved in the community. It's not enough for us to gather together here every Sunday and offer beautiful worship - although of course we should do this - but we must love our neighbours. We need to find good causes to support: we're already behind the Foodbank, but what else should we do?

As a church, I suggest we should also consider having a fund for outward giving, a tithe (it's typically 10% of a church's income); then we need to adopt projects to support, maybe, say, one on our doorstep and one overseas. Then we need people in the congregation to become 'champions' of those projects, to bring us news of how they're doing and how we are involved, what our people are doing. Ideally we need representatives of the projects to come and talk to us, perhaps by giving us a sermon or having a 'pulpit dialogue' as they used to have in City churches sometimes.

If any of this sparks off an idea in you, do please come and tell me, either after service now, or give me a call. Remember those wonderful but challenging lines from St Matthew chapter 25:

31 When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory:

32 And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats:

33 And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left.

34 Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:

35For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in:

36Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.

37Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink?

38When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee?

39Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?

40And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.

I do hope we realise that that beautiful passage is, truly, 'political': it has a social, political message, just as much as it is at the very heart of individual morality. One thing is certain, though: these days you couldn't do it all with swords, like Solomon. Society has made some progress. Now we at St Mary's need to do our bit too.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant