

Sermon Archive 498

Sunday 18 August, 2024

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Readings: 1 Kings 2: 10-12, 3:3-14
Ephesians 5: 15-20

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



A few weeks back I spent a bit of time talking about how careful we need to be when we use the language of struggle or fighting to describe our approach to civil discourse and political engagement. I'd watched Donald Trump clapping his ear and shouting "fight, fight, fight". The next day many attendees at a Republican rally had chanted the same thing for no discernible reason - other than that they had heard it from their leader. With some degree of judgment in my heart, I criticized this uncritical parroting of unwise language.

Well, shortly after that, after Joe Biden had stepped down, and Kamala Harris stepped up, she announced to excited Democrats that she now was up to "fight for the future". Since then, her newly selected running mate, Governor Tim Walz from Minnesota, has said to an excited crowd in Philadelphia that "when we fight, we win".

It seems that neither side of that particular race sees wisdom in avoiding the use of the language of fighting. O well. I don't know everything. Perhaps there's something that I'm failing to see.

-ooOoo-

Watching the TVNZ 6 o'clock news on Monday, I saw political editor Maiki Sherman talking about the government's new traffic light system for managing beneficiaries. Part of the red light setting involves loading part of the beneficiary's benefit onto electronic cards that can only be used at certain retail outlets and only for certain purposes. Speaking of how this worked in Australia, David Seymour said "When **they** introduced electronic cards, there was less money spent on drugs, alcohol, tobacco and gambling - more money on baby food and nappies." OK . . . Thinking about that . . .

Maike went on to say "ACT also tried but failed to impose [this system] on women who have more children while on a benefit. David Seymour said [quote] "The question is what is the role of the government and the tax payer, to keep giving you a pay increase for each child that you have."

Hmm, David. "Pay increase"? You use that expression as if the benefit is a wage for an adult. I naively thought it was about support for a child. Yes, either way, more money is disbursed; but I feel that your use of the phrase "pay increase for each child you have" comes from a world view of blame . . . But again, maybe you have a wisdom that I lack. It's probably just as well that I'm not in charge. I'd only spend money we don't have.

-ooOoo-

I find myself quite often these days listening to the language of leaders, and finding myself wondering about what wisdom does or does not sit behind it. And yes, I **do** sometimes pray for our leaders.

-ooOoo-

Solomon has come into a position of responsibility. Probably he was in his late teens or early twenties when it happened. And it probably was a bit of a surprise, since he wasn't the heir apparent. His way to the throne apparently was something driven by his mother (the famous Bathsheba, whom King David had raped). Nasty family this one. The long and short of it is that while some victory is won in a battle between the late David's eight wives or concubines, some seemingly wet-behind-the-ears man (or more properly "boy") ends up King.

What did we sing about in the pre-sermon hymn? We sang:

Longing for peace, our world is troubled.

Longing for hope, many despair.

Longing for food, many are hungry.

Longing for water, many still thirst.

Longing for shelter people are homeless.

Longing for warmth, many are cold.

Well now, suddenly, all these problems of the world fall into the lap of Solomon. The nation now is **his** responsibility. In the face of the challenge, he describes himself as feeling like a child. Well? He is. He has the naivety of a child. When speaking of his father, he speaks of a

man who was faithful and righteous, with an upright heart. That's rubbish, of course, (remember the rape, the war, the slaughter, the nepotism). But Solomon's mis-reading of his father comes across to me anyway not as a self-seeking post-truth protestation. It comes across to me as someone who still has to learn how to be properly critical. "I love my dad who can do no wrong." (Love is easy maybe, when you're ignorant.) "But now, most importantly, what am I going to do with all the despair, hunger, thirst and homelessness?"

It is traditional to celebrate Solomon for his choice: given the complete freedom to ask for whatever he wanted, he chose wisdom. Even God congratulates him on making that choice. God sees selflessness in it. God sees a well-disposed heart. And who am I to question God's assessment? (I'll question the assessment of Republicans, Democrats and David Seymour. Not so sure about questioning God's assessment.) I'm just thinking that if you're young and a bit frightened, and suddenly a nation is dropped into your lap, praying that you might know what to do, might just be natural. And maybe part of what God loves, when commending Solomon, is that it *is* the request of someone who is new, and scared, and slightly out of depth. Maybe God would much rather have *that* on the throne than one of its alternatives.

It was in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton (an historian by education and the Bishop of London by vocation) that Lord Acton wrote, in 1885, the following:

*I cannot accept your canon that we are to judge Pope and King unlike other men, with a favourable presumption that they did no wrong. If there is **any** presumption, it is the **other** way against holders of power, increasing as the power increases. Historic responsibility has to make up for the want of legal responsibility. **Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.** Great men are almost always bad men, even when they exercise influence and not authority: still more when you superadd the tendency or the certainty of corruption by authority.*

The contention is that the deeper you get into power, or governance, the more experienced you are in the exercise of power, the *less likely* you are to be motivated by a winsome love for the people. I don't think Lord Acton was wrong. We have seen various leaders in relatively recent times who, after significant time in office, have felt emboldened to do dreadful things. A few "kilometres on their clocks" gives them a

street confidence. I hesitate to call it a "world-wisdom", because much like "fighting" and "pay rise", I just don't think that "wisdom" is the right word.

The story of Solomon asking for wisdom guides us, I think, as we critique what wisdom actually means on the ground. "Wisdom" is not the same as "cunning". To suggest it is, is to insult the Giver of Wisdom.

In the conversation between God and Solomon, wisdom is tangled up with wanting to serve well, to do no harm to the people around you. Wisdom is about knowing that the people around you deserve your best - or at least your most competent. Wisdom is about discerning good from evil - not confusing the two. Wisdom is knowing that you don't know everything - something unlikely to appeal to people whose vocab is all about "fighting" and whose ideology only recognises payment. Ah, preacher, better let that go! When the leaders are wise, God has answered prayer. When the people are blessed by their leaders being wise, God smiles.

-ooOoo-

A few words about today's second reading - from the Letter to the Ephesians. The writer says to the locals "just be careful how you live - not as unwise people, but as wise." Spend a little less time getting drunk, a wee bit more time pondering the will of God. Sing songs together, and let your being together . . . , yeah, let it be a melody. Indeed, let your life, among the lives of others, be a "harmony". Pop a little descant into it as well, if you like. Give thanks to God at all times, for everything. Call the times "evil" if you like (because in some ways they are), but make sure you make the most of the time you have. Think about Jesus a lot, and say your prayers. Because that's what wise people do.

I'm not sure, people of Knox, that if we were to repackage that as a political manifesto, we'd get many votes. I don't imagine we'll see it looming large in the lead-up to America's November's elections. But it might just be that our world has a deep need for those who want to remind the world that there is such a thing as wisdom. The Christians may have treasures in their kete! I believe that Solomon really has no idea what to do. But **for** him, from our kete, I know we have a word.

We keep a moment of quiet.

The Knox Church website is at: <http://www.knoxchurch.co.nz.html> . Sermons are to be found under News / Sermons.