

## Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

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*Rector of St James*

**Pentecost 5**

(a-os14)

**9 July 2017**

**Readings:** Genesis 24: 34-38, 42-49, 58-67; Psalm 45: 10-17;  
Romans 7: 14-25; Matthew 11: 15-19, 25-30.

*‘Wisdom is Vindicated by Her Deeds’*

### **You Cannot Fool All the People All the Time**

*It was crisis day in the Parliament, the House was hushed and still,  
as a Member rose with a question: “Are we doomed to go downhill?”*

*” I’m confident of an upturn” the PM made reply:  
“If workers’ pay is held at bay we’ll all be home and dry.”*

*“How true! How true!” cried the workers “Let’s end this wicked strike,  
we don’t want a rise in wages, they can keep it if they like.”*

*“Thank God! Thank God!” sobbed the bosses, “There’s faith on the factory floor,  
and now we’ve got this extra loot we’ll give it to the poor!”*

*They filled their pockets with money and ran with eager feet  
pressing their surplus profits on the people in the street.*

*They moved among the dole-queues and boarded every bus,  
With streaming eyes and heartfelt cries: “You need it more than us!”*

*Soon all the people prospered and the devil became a saint  
now that the sober unions had exercised restraint;*

*And the cities were filled with singing and the sound of laughter spread  
as hand took hand in the golden land... and pigs flew overhead.*

Yes, I know it is an old socialist poem and some will feel it shouldn’t be heard in church, yet the Old Testament prophets often spoke in a similar vein when calling the community to return to the provision of justice for the poor and marginalised. It probably also says something about current economic problems such as the failure of the idea of ‘trickle down’ wealth, and the dilemma facing the retail trade when people’s wages remain the same while the cost of living rises – but I am digressing.

Apart from being a cautionary tale for all political leaders, I read the poem because it highlights the gulf that often lies between idealism and reality; between policy and outcomes; or, as St Paul implies in today's epistle reading, between what we say we want to do and what we actually do. This is part of the human dilemma, we often know what is good, right and true but nevertheless choose to do the opposite, even when it hurts us!

And why? Perhaps it is because we are more driven by our fantasies, desires and expectations than by the realities of life. We are very susceptible to believing our own propaganda, which can lead us into making bad decisions. Instead of searching for the truth (which can be a difficult task), we seek out something that confirms our prejudice; and away we go trampling over all and sundry, often not considering the ongoing consequences of our actions.

A saying, often attributed to Abraham Lincoln, goes:

*"You can fool all the people some of the time, and some of the people all the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time."*

Who we are and what we stand for usually becomes clear through our actions, and thus our motivations are ultimately laid bare for all the world to see. That is why St Paul wrote about the problem of the inner conflict that comes with human morality:

*"I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." (Romans 7: 15)*

What are we to do about this? The Christian faith teaches about the need for transformation in our lives. This involves a process of recognition of who we really are, our need to change, to seek God's forgiving presence and embracing renewal by letting God's sacrificial love become the basis for our lives, rather than self-centredness. The confession in our liturgy is a recognition of this.

Another way of thinking about this is through the acknowledgement of the need for God, which becomes the beginning of wisdom and commencement of a life-long process of conversion that causes us to shape our lives more and more on Jesus. It is not about living a fantasy, or being so idealistic that there is no reality to what we say or do, but rather it requires us to be honest about who we are.

## **Expectations**

Of course, this process is not only about being honest about ourselves, but it is also about being honest about others. That is, accepting people for who they are rather than what we want them to be, or because of what they might do for us.

Jesus had a constant problem dealing with the expectations of others – be it his disciples, the crowds or the authorities. In today’s Gospel reading he contrasts the public expectations of himself with John the Baptist:

*"But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'"* (Matthew 11: 16-19)

Many of the religious and political leaders in Jesus’ time rejected his message because he did not conform to their expectation of what a ‘messiah’ was supposed to look like. They sought a political messiah who would raise an army and throw out the Romans, such as the revolutionary Judas Maccabeus had done 200 years earlier. This sort of behaviour would have been more expressive of a God that fitted the perceived needs of the nation at the time – a comfortable household god that confirms our prejudices, keeps the status quo and wins our wars.

It is in this way, our political expectations can create a false God, or idol, that is merely an extension of and justification for our desires. But the narrative that runs down through the Old and New Testaments points to a God that makes us uncomfortable and challenges us to be honest, while recognising our need to change. This type of salvation is not about our needs and expectations, but rather about justice, mercy and love for others.

### **Wisdom as Action**

Jesus used an enigmatic saying in his response to those who have unrealistic expectations; he said: “Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds”. It suggests that wisdom is proven, not by the cleverness of the idea itself but rather through its application and the success it brings.

In the context of the reading, Jesus also suggested that the wise will recognise both John the Baptist as God’s prophet and Jesus as God’s anointed one and therefore accept his message. Jesus argued that it was his and John the Baptist’s deeds that will be the proof of who they are, rather than the expectations of others.

This is perhaps one of those moments of difference between ‘Athens’ and ‘Jerusalem’; that is between reason and faith, between ideas and actions. An Athenian view of wisdom would be focussed on understanding the cleverness and logic of an argument, whereas a Jewish view of wisdom is concerned with achieving good social outcomes. Hence, King Solomon prays for wisdom so that he can be an effective ruler.

It is worth considering the nature of ‘wisdom as action’, and its broad effect. We often pray for wisdom in our leaders so that they may make good decisions and work for the common good. We also recognised that wisdom is bigger than our own needs because it is focussed on the good of the community. In this respect, wisdom is a communal thing, concerned with how we are to live together, rather than for the fulfilment of individualistic desires. Wisdom is therefore:

- Situationally aware,
- grounded in what is good and just,
- leads to reconciliation and restoration, and
- brings integrity: physically, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually.

### **Weighed Down by Burdens**

The business of applying wisdom is not easy, and we need assistance and encouragement to persevere and succeed. Understanding human nature and our motivations is a good start, but then we are challenged to change what is wrong. This is not easy because it is about admitting weakness and failure.

An image that Jesus used was one of being weighed down by burdens. I remember an experience during my time in the army when we had to carry a pack and other equipment that made it almost impossible to walk upright or quickly. The load was often around 45 kilograms, which for most on our team was well over half their body-weight. It was not pleasant, made movement slow and cumbersome, and ultimately led to injury.

Jesus said, “his burden is light”, that is to say, when we recognise our need for help, we can turn to God and offer our burdens to him. It stands in contrast to Jesus’ denouncing of the scribes and Pharisees later in Matthew’s Gospel, when he says of them:

*“... do not do as they do, for they do not practise what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by others...”* (Matthew 23: 3-5)

Wisdom involves understanding our motivations, being honest with ourselves and others, and willing to change so that the common good may be furthered in society. God offers to be part of this process by relieving us of those things that weigh us down and hinder us. In this way, wisdom is understood as relational and grows out of our relationship with Christ.