

ARPC Sunday 20th February 2022 OOS

Welcome & Call to Worship

An important theme in worship is to give thanks to God. Our default sadly is when things go wrong is to blame someone and when things go well to take the glory for ourselves. The Psalmist in v21 has just had a great victory in battle and these are his words. However the deeper thankfulness is expressed by the Lord Jesus for his victory from the grave in resurrection (v4). Read Psalm 21:1-7 .

The classic Psalm for giving thanks is Psalm 100, so can I ask you to stand and sing Psalm 100 all people that on earth do dwell.

Hymn: All people that on earth do dwell

Prayers of Adoration & Confession (Sam)

Reading: Ecclesiastes 8:1-17 (Obasi)

Hymn: Speak O Lord

Sermon:

Have you ever done anything stupid? I have and you probably know me well enough to not be surprised. Have you ever said anything stupid and been really embarrassed? Or have you been in a difficult situation and wish the words would come to you, but they don't! We are often stupid and lack wisdom. We generally accept that fact by saying we are only human!

There was one man who was always wise and could handle himself in every situation. That man was Jesus. There are many examples of his wisdom, but this is my favourite. The Jewish religious leaders (Pharisees) and the Jewish nationalists sought to trap Jesus over the issue of their day. Palestine although Jewish was occupied by the Romans and resented paying taxes to the Roman authorities. It was a controversial issue. The consensus was not to pay taxes if you were a loyal Jew. So, they ask Jesus directly, hoping to trap him, "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" The question was not overly difficult, it is right to pay taxes, but Jesus' answer was visually brilliant, was right in telling the people to pay taxes and it was a challenge to give what is appropriate to all relevant authority. *"Show me the coin used for the paying of tax." They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription? Caesar's, they replied. Then he said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away. Matthew 22:15-22*

Jesus' answer was recognised by his enemies, defused their intention to trap, and it left them with no response. Jesus used wise words to deal with a difficult question.

There are different ways to be wise and Jesus demonstrated wisdom on another occasion by simply going away, by not taking on the challenge of confrontation. The same Jewish religious and nationalists sought to have Jesus killed and Jesus went away, he withdrew, he kept himself in the countryside and mountains. Until the time was right, he did not seek any

confrontation. Jesus always acted wisely, and that is a good thing and attractive and he also had the wisdom to know which course of action was best.

The Teacher today advocates wisdom (v1) he outlines a difficult scenario in v2-5 but then having done so he outlines the limitations of wisdom and the injustices in the world (as in Ch 6:10-7:29) with a familiar conclusion in (v15) and the significant conclusion in (v16-17), so let us have a look and see what he says.

Wisdom is good (v1)

A wise King will have advisors. It's a good job and usually it is the best and brightest who get to be in that position, the top jobs in the civil service. These are the people he is thinking about in his introduction in v1. People like Joseph who advised Pharaoh, Pharaoh's assessment of Joseph was in keeping with v1, *"Since God has made all this known to you (special revelation through the interpretation of dreams) there is no-one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be in charge of my palace and all my people are to submit to your orders."* Genesis 41:39-40 Wisdom is good, it guides a nation and individuals, it can defuse a situation, it can cheer and reassure the heart, which will show on your face. Like Joseph, like Jesus!

Use wisdom in life's challenges (v2-5)

So you work for the King, or you have occasion to come into the King's presence, then act wisely because he is a powerful man. This King is probably not benevolent, he (v5) can cause you harm. He is representative of strong people or institutions of authority and when we navigate our lives in their presence and in relation to their authority, we should be wise.

Obey them not because they are the King (authority) but **because you** have made a promise to God. Your obedience is cognisant of God and his authority and your oath to him. This is a fascinating idea, because it allows us to work out what is wise in relation to most matters. Take the issue of paying taxes. As citizens we are obligated to pay taxes, the law of Ireland says so and we should do it. This does not conflict with our duty as citizens of the Kingdom of God, under the rule of Jesus Christ because every authority on earth has been set up under the sovereignty of God. Romans 13:1 *"Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God."* Obey the king (authorities) command but do so aware of your greater responsibility to God. (This will allow us sometimes to defy the Law of the King if it conflicts with the law of God.)

Do not be in a hurry to leave the King's presence. Do not treat him with any disrespect, or contempt. You may not like them, and disagree with them but the wise person treats authority with respect.

Do not stand up for (defend) a bad cause (what is wrong) for he will do whatever he pleases. Since a king's word is supreme, who can say to him, "What you are doing is wrong." Have the wisdom to admit when something is wrong, don't defend the indefensible, don't in that context challenge him. A politician might be asked to argue for a speeding ticket or drink driving conviction to be quashed by a constituent. A parent might be asked to advocate for

their child in a misdemeanour. Better to admit the fault and ask for mercy, than to take the authority on when at fault.

“Whoever obeys his command will come to no harm”, which is self-evident “and the wise heart will know the proper time and procedure.” It is a beautiful phrase of wisdom, poise and action, it was undoubtedly seen in the life of Jesus. In refers to the proper time in Ch 3 *“A time for everything, a season for every activity under heaven.” “A time to be silent and a time to speak, a time for war and a time for peace.”*

Careful thought is needed when facing the challenges of authority, particularly a difficult and ungodly authority. The life of Jesus shows that there can be poise and peace as life is navigated. There are times when you will be insulted, persecuted and falsely accused of evil because of Jesus and his authority in that you are blessed. Jesus said, *“I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore, be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.”* Matthew 10:21 Careful thought and compelling character, commends the message. The Teacher urges us to be wise in life’s challenges. We have the example and the word of God to aid us to live wisely.

The limitation of wisdom (v6-9)

No-one knows the future (v6-7)

The teacher repeats the fact of everything having its time but places a limiting statement which I wondered about, *“though a person’s misery weighs heavily upon them.”* What is that misery? Context tells us that misery is that people do not know what lies in the future. I have the Met Eireann app on my devices and recently there have been yellow, amber and red weather warnings on the island of Ireland, the reason for the prediction of the future is that we can prepare. If I had known that our basketball hoop would have blown over and smashed, I would have secured it. If I had known something about the future I would have lived differently, we can have regrets when we discover just exactly what the future holds. Wisdom is limited because it doesn’t know the future. The example of Joseph’s special revelation about the famine in Egypt and the surrounding world was unusual and God given for the benefit of his people. We live says the Teacher with the limitation of not knowing the future.

Cannot control the present (v8-9a)

The teacher gives four examples and note his use of the word power

1. No power over the wind. Our recent storms Dudley, Eunice and Franklin are good illustrations of what the Teacher has previous called a chasing after the wind, a futile and Hebel experience.
2. No power over the day of your death. While medical advances have given us some help in better health and longevity in life, we do not know when we will die.
3. No power to be released from an army when the battle begins. No -one in Russia or Ukrainian armies are saying things like I have a holiday planned let me go. No all leave is cancelled!

4. No power to be released from the power of wickedness. This is where sin is deceitful. It promises pleasure, it feels good at the time, but those pictures and words online are always there. Those patterns that have become addictions are impossible to kick on your own.

This is the observation of the Teacher as he surveys the world, there are limitations of wisdom things we cannot know, and an inability to control the present, this is the reality of the world in which he lives, and which distresses him because he understands his powerlessness, his vulnerability even as a wise man of means. His last comment is very telling, *“There is a time when a man Lords it over others to his own hurt.”* Is he thinking of a wicked King, a man of power, who has made his life misery and who is prospering, lording it over others, causing others pain and difficulty and who appears untouchable? (v9) Yet he also is trapped in his wickedness, and he will die just like the others. No human being has the power to know the day of his death or prevent it and so they are trapped, in a cycle of wickedness. They are trapped in a way that prevents them really enjoying life now because their whole focus is on lording it over others.

Though the Teacher was limited in his view of life, to everything done under the sun. We are not and as the Apostle Peter told the powerful centurion Cornelius, *“he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he (Jesus) is the one whom God has appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”* Acts 10:42-43 Ultimately sin causes not only physical death but eternal death and no human being has the power to overcome the righteous judgement of God. Wickedness / sin captures us and is eternally deadly and that is the ultimate hurt. *“Wickedness will not release those who practice it.”* For that we are powerless and need a saviour. We praise God for Jesus and his power over sin and death.

Injustice in the world. (v10- 14)

This is a new section because he introduces it with *“then too, I saw”* (v10) he has observed other scenarios in the world. His mind is pre-occupied with the reality of injustice in the world.

He has seen it in the Lording it over of others and he has seen it in the way these same powerful people are buried. (v10) They have funerals where people praise them and are conducted in the synagogue. This is anathema to him, the unrighteous and righteous mixing is Hebel, a meaningless ritual without any truth or substance.

He has seen the wicked and their wickedness not get the justice it deserved. (v11) Getting off on technicalities, a life sentence that is becomes less than 10 years, justice perverted through bribes or fear in the judiciary, or justice delayed or people with money lawyering up. We see this with Christians in many parts of the world and documented on the Church in Chains website!

He has seen the one who commits 100 crimes (hyperbole) still live a long time. (v12) He also notes this again in v14 that the righteous get what the unrighteous deserve namely death

and the unrighteous get to live a long time. All of this is meaningless to him, and by that he means it distresses him, in its injustice and unfairness and he is struggling to make sense of what he has seen and that is why he repeats the word Hebel three times in these verses. Hebel, Hebel, Hebel! The big question of the previous chapter? Why?

Wisdom's answer (v12-17)

Traditional wisdom (v12-13)

Ecclesiastes is wisdom for life when it doesn't always make sense, in Hebel. Whereas Proverbs, also a wisdom book, tells us what should happen what the normal outcome should be.

22:6 *"Train a child in the way he / she should go and when he / she is old they will not depart from it"* Upbringing is important, values instilled early last, faith implanted in childhood will have a good effect. In the perfect world that would be always the case, but this is not a perfect world, and it isn't always the case.

Proverbs is traditional wisdom and is good and correct, in essence it is you reap what you sow wisdom which is normally correct but that is the dilemma the teacher has uncovered, those who sowed a righteous life died in their righteousness early.

Generally, it will go well with those who are righteous, and it will not usually go well with those who are wicked. That wisdom still holds and therefore wisdom encourages people to walk and react to all injustices with the steady walk of doing the right thing at the right time. "There is a proper time and procedure for every matter" (v5-6) That wisdom holds and even if tough that is a position of faith and trust in God as the Teacher says, Fear God, humbly and obediently walk in his ways.

Enjoy life as God's gift (v15)

I hope that you are beginning to understand that this is a key point for the Teacher. He has recommended this path of wisdom in Ch 2:24-26; Ch 3:12-13, v22; Ch 5:18-20 God gives us everything at their proper time and we are to enjoy those times and the work he gives us to do. This is again a position of faith, of trust in God and importantly a recognition of his grace to us. We see life as a gift from God not as a reward for hard work.

Remember no-one knows all that God does (v16-17)

Even after he applied his mind, he still cannot give the answer, to the question why good people die young, there is a limitation to human wisdom, no-one can know fully the mind of God, he says it three times in v17. He realises afresh that too much puzzling over life, is not producing the answers he seeks, but he is not without hope or guidance he knows that God is God therefore let God be God and enjoy what he gives to you. This too is a position of faith.

When life is difficult, and answers are not forthcoming. Use wisdom to keep doing what is right and avoid what is wrong. Enjoy what you have been given from God as grace from his good hand and do so accepting the sovereignty of God in setting the times.

Careful thought and compelling character, commends the message. The Teacher urges us to be wise in life's challenges even when we do not know all that God does. We can hold to and live in the confidence of the wisdom of God, as Jesus perfectly demonstrated in his life on earth.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." Isaiah Ch 55:8-9

Oh, the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable his judgements, and his paths beyond tracing out. Who has known the Lord or been his counsellor? Who has ever given to God that God should repay him? For from him and through him and too him are all things. To him be glory for ever Amen. Romans 11:33-36

Hymn: Behold our God

Announcements

Prayers of Intercession (Ethan)

Hymn: Come behold the wondrous mystery

Benediction

Discussion Questions:

When we act unwisely, we often respond, "I'm only human." What does this reveal about what we functionally believe?

The Teacher values wisdom here as it guides our interactions with earthly authorities. How does Jesus model this? How might you, too, apply wisdom to your interactions with earthly authorities?

How have you experienced the limitations of wisdom? How might experiencing these limitations impact your relationship with God and others?