

Wising up

How do we know if we are living wisely?

Readings:

1 Kings 2: 10-12, 3: 3 – 14

Proverbs 9: 1 – 6

John 6: 51 - 58

I really admire the people who know what they want to do with their lives. Who have focused relentlessly on achieving it. Who I can see have made an impact on the world. If it wasn't for them and what they did and the way they did it, the world would be a less good place.

People you read about in magazines. They have experienced something awful in their lives, but it's proved a turning point and spurred them on to achieve great things.

People like wise King Solomon, quick witted, with an encyclopaedic knowledge and who ruled well.

People like Jesus, not just filling people's bellies but filling their spirits with food that will last. Giving of their very selves, their flesh and blood, to ensure it is achieved.

When I say I admire them, I mean I'm slightly envious, jealous even. For I know if I hadn't have done all the things in my life that I might call significant, someone else would. If I tell you my job title and employer, you will be impressed. But if I didn't do that job, someone else would. If I wasn't standing here to preach this morning, someone else would be. And while they would have done it differently, can I really, hand on heart, say that the way I did it made a marked difference on the world?

I say this not because I am fishing for compliments but because I know I'm not the only one who feels this. Both Christianity and the world measure us in terms of the impact we have on the world. We are encouraged to live like every day is our last, from the early Church who believed a new heaven and earth would arrive tomorrow, to those whose motto is *carpe diem*, seize the day, or YOLO, you only live once.

Is the received wisdom really so wise?

A few things recently have caused me to assess whether some of the received wisdom really is so wise.

Firstly, over the last few months, some of the most counter-cultural passages we have heard read from the bible have been about the power in our weakness. They have challenged a target obsessed, performance assessing, achievement driven culture. Perhaps our desire to make a lasting different in the world is not always how God is speaking to us but that we want to feel good about ourselves. I want something I can point to about how I've lived my life, because then I don't need to doubt whether I've done the right thing. Our umming and ahing about whether we are living a good life ends up being exhausting and stops us from getting on with those things we could do well.

Secondly, that those people in magazines with their inspiring stories are only one set of stories. To mark ten years since the 7/7 bombings the Observer [<http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/jun/21/life-after-7-july-attacks-london-survivors-stories>] interviewed seven survivors. Most were inspiring. People who had lost limbs but gone on to establish charities or compete in the Paralympics. A lawyer who had created case law in order to get justice for the injured. It finished by interviewing a man who had been caught in one of the explosions but was able to walk away. He had had nightmares ever since and when the psychological treatments weren't working he tried to get through by moving to the US and throwing himself into his work. Ten years later he was still struggling. He concluded by saying:

“I know we owe it to those who died to make the most of our lives, but this can lead to added pressure or guilt if we don’t accomplish something with our second chance. I don’t want to sound like a doommonger among friends. I’m grateful for life, so I hope to overcome a difficult episode I’m currently experiencing.”

Thirdly, I’ve had to take some big decisions in the last few months about what I want to do with my life. The jobs I’ve applied for feel like worthy things to do, working with and for people who have experienced massive injustices and who lives in lands wracked by conflict. The jobs will certainly cost me a lot, putting me at discomfort and some degree of danger. I know that they will change me as a person and I will get a lot out of them. But I also know that if I don’t do them, somebody else will take my place. And the next two years of my life will be very different.

All our bible readings this morning speak directly to me in this situation, and to those like me who are trying to work out how to be wise and live their lives so they do the right thing. I’ve drawn from them two things:

Firstly: that it doesn’t matter which decision we take, but once we have decided we must live it like we are completely certain

Secondly: that if we seek wisdom first, everything else will follow

The decision doesn’t matter, but once decided must live it like we are certain

To take the first point first. Can we ever know whether those decisions are the right ones? Clearly in some we can, and if you are currently trying to decide whether to pursue nursing or armed robbery, I don’t think you need me to tell you.

Many people have been reflecting in this A level results week on how they didn’t get the grades they wanted or failed to get into the University they wanted. What felt like a fatal blow at the time has actually resulted in great things. Looking back, they struggle to remember why it felt like such a big thing at the time.

While Solomon asked for wisdom he turned out not to be so wise after all. He was clever with strategic marriages to many foreign wives which no doubt contributed to Israel being at peace with its neighbours for his reign. But he forgot what God had said to him and as a result his son lost the kingdom. We need to be careful what standards we hold up for ourselves. We should examine our motivations and check we are not holding ourselves up to some false standard, that they are not actually about regret or about achieving sometime to make us feel better about ourselves.

The philosopher Nietzsche [<http://www.psmag.com/health-and-behavior/its-our-party-we-can-do-what-we-want-until-we-die-so-lead-a-meaningful-life-okay>] over a century ago challenged those who claimed a fulfilled life came from seizing the moment. He proposed rather than *carpe diem* the idea of *amor fati* or love of one’s fate.

“My formula for greatness in a human being is amor fati: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it—all idealism is mendaciousness in the face of what is necessary—but love it.”

The writer of Ecclesiastes put it in another way, cutting through anyone motivated by conceit and immortality:

“whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in the dead land to which you are going” (9:10)

How we live is more important than those big life decisions

See wisdom first, everything else will follow

Which leads us to the second point: if we seek wisdom first, everything else will follow. While the wisdom that comes from God is open to all who seek from, it can only be found by those who make seeking wisdom their first priority. We are no longer living on our own wits.

Back to those decisions I've made, I'm pretty nervous about what I've decided and am trying not to think "what have I done". But it has already forced me to rely on God more and less on my own wits which were, I'm coming to realise, mostly good enough to see me through. I know these are things I can't do alone.

I'm not recommending the course I've taken to others. It is certainly not needed for seeking the way of wisdom and insight. But it has reminded me that "I am only a little child, I do not know how to go out or come in", I cannot live on my own wits and need to seek wisdom and seek God. That is the course towards knowing how to do the right thing, to be fulfilled: to know how to abide in God and God in me.

Reflecting on the reading from John we heard this morning, one theologian sums this up saying: "What we have to do with [Christ's] flesh and blood is not chew and swallow, but that we recognize in his crucified body and poured out blood the ground of our life, that we hang our faith and hope on that body and blood and draw from there our thinking and our willing"

(Schlatter cited in Beasley-Murray, G.R. (1999) John. Word Biblical Commentary, p95)