

Sermon for the opening of the new Parliament 12/11/2013

Readings:

Proverbs 8:1-17

Luke 11: 5-13

The Face of Wisdom

'Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice'
(Proverbs 8:1).

I remember over two decades ago asking my academic supervisor in relation to a particularly difficult theological matter, 'how do you find wisdom'. His response was simple, 'by being wise'. So I tried a different tact: Well 'what makes a person wise'. His answer was equally simple, 'by seeking wisdom'. A circular argument if ever there was. Apparently wisdom calls us to be wise; and yet only the wise hear her calling.

Who are the wise people you have known? What made them wise? Was it that they knew when to be quiet and just listen – not too many of those folk around! Was it their ability to go straight to the issue or problem? Or perhaps they had the ability and the inner confidence to believe in you and free you to be the best you could be? Perhaps they could see potential in others and encourage it. Or maybe it was some other quality.

The gospels present Jesus as a teacher of wisdom. But evidently not everyone appreciated it. That's the problem with wisdom – some people don't get it or desire it or welcome it. The know-it-alls, those who are used to being heard, those who make decisions on behalf of others – in other words those of us who have access to knowledge and power – generally the developed world, wealthy countries like Australia, leaders in industry, church, politics and finance – we are particularly susceptible to being blind to wisdom. Of course we all have our blind spots. We usually have great gifts for identifying them in others. What's really interesting is not whether we have them or not but whether we know it and ignore it (that's called willful blindness) or we simply never know it – blindly ignorant.

Like oil and water, wisdom and blind spots don't mix well, if at all. And this is a problem for us. We need wise persons; we need people and institutions to seek wisdom above all else.

But wisdom is never the soft option; quite the contrary. It has a precision about it that can cut through a lot of rubbish – this can be disarming and unpopular. Wisdom has a force that requires to be reckoned with but is never violent; rather it is a force for peace. But it is difficult to specify its content. The practice of wisdom requires a ruthless honesty with self; willingness to wrestle with the blind spots; to find a peace within and a balanced spirit. Why so? Because we are then able to engage with others peacefully and passionately rather than out of confusion and self-seeking.

Wisdom is often born in the crucible of suffering. It produces a more realistic and humble attitude. You know you are on the wisdom road when you spend more energy working towards the longer term and less time on expedient short-term fixes. It's not a band-aid solution to cover over the ailments. Rather it is a like a healing medicine. Wisdom works in a similar way to what in medical terms it is known as granulation. In granulation theory the healing begins in the body beneath the wound. Wisdom is to be found just beneath the wounds of our society; it is embedded in the very things that perplex, confront and divide us: asylum seekers and people migration, indigenous reconciliation, ethical leadership, health and education, gay marriage, controversies over the environment and climate change. Wisdom calls us to what? Calls us not to flee from such things but go deeper into them because that is where the healing wisdom will be found. And as we do it together not alone; wisdom grows through collaborative practices.

As the writer of Proverbs reminds us: 'On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out'. At the crossroads of our lives – our family relationships; at the crossroads of our institutional life; in the cut and the thrust of political argument and social conflict wisdom takes her stand. And in the temptations of our lives to take short cuts, ignore the obvious, pursue goals for personal or party benefit, the wisdom writer from an ancient time stands with a placard that reads: 'all that you may desire cannot compare with wisdom'.

So the clarion call from Proverbs is clear and simple: seek wisdom. “I love those who love me, and those who seek me diligently find me’. It is echoed in the words of Jesus: ‘Ask and it will be given you, search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.’

As a new Parliament begins I encourage you to hear the call of wisdom. But beware; there is no cheap wisdom. To be a true seeker after wisdom will cost you a lot. At times our reputation will be on the line. But it’s not finally one’s reputation that matters but one’s character. The seeker after wisdom will have the lines of wisdom drawn on their face; the school of hard knocks, agonizing over decisions that will be costly to self as well as to others; the lines on the face of a calm and composed self in the midst of conflict.

The Gospels offer a snapshot of the face of wisdom in Jesus Christ – here was not only a true seeker of wisdom; here was one who embodied the wisdom of God and was despised and rejected. Such was the price of God’s wisdom. The resurrection of Jesus is the raising of wisdom; it cannot be finally destroyed.

What face will this next session of Parliament show to this country and the world? At this Parliament will the face of wisdom rise up? Who will take a stand at the crossroads for wisdom? The issues confronting our nation at the crossroads are significant; when you leave this place they will be waiting for you just up the hill. In such matters surely what we are to seek is a common wisdom. A wisdom that goes beyond partisan politics to that space where people act together to promote and protect the well being of the whole. This does not come easily; it will have a price; it will be the road less travelled; the road of consensus and common action. Perhaps not all the time, though that would be exceedingly good; but perhaps at critical points to find something more, a different face for this Parliament with which to face the people of Australia and our neighbours near and far.

May the God of wisdom and grace go with you.

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