

Wisdom and the Kingdom of God

By Rev. Matthew Monnig, S.J.

July 26, 2020 – Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings: 1 Kings 3.5, 7-12; Romans 8.28-30; Matthew 13.44-52

What is wisdom? Philosophy, as the love of wisdom, seeks to answer this question, as does theology, for which wisdom is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Today's readings are a Biblical exploration of the question of wisdom.

Defining True Wisdom

In the first reading (1 Kgs 3.5, 7–12), King Solomon asks God for the gift of wisdom above worldly riches, thereby becoming the great Biblical icon of this virtue. In his petition to God he describes wisdom as “an understanding heart to judge your people and to distinguish right from wrong.” As a ruler, he asks for wisdom not to benefit himself but to benefit his people. The two clauses in this expression are likely an example of a Hebrew parallelism that is explanatory: to judge your people is to distinguish right from wrong. Today, this ability to judge rightly according to reason and the Holy Spirit is more fashionably called discernment.

Wisdom, as the ability to judge rightly, is distinct from expert knowledge. Our culture today idolizes expert knowledge, giving it absolute authority with a kind of sacral reverence. Experts are our rulers and their pronouncements are treated as if infallible. Such knowledge is not wisdom, however, but it can only inform it. The public health expert understands the transmission of disease, the economist understands the working of the economy, and the Biblical scholar understands the historical context and literary sources of the sacred text, but none of these confer wisdom, which shows how to use such information with discernment. Wisdom places information, often enough acquired from experts, in a hierarchy of goods, and judges what is right and wrong and what is the greater good. The wise ruler will judge what is for the benefit of the people, keeping in mind all their goods and the relationship between them. The knowledge possessed by experts lacks that broad view and the capacity to place that knowledge in a framework of goods. Rather than relativize their knowledge in light of a supreme good, expert knowledge vies to be the ultimate consideration. The public health expert only considers physical health, the economist only financial prosperity, the Biblical scholar only knowledge of the text's historical and literary features. Wisdom organizes such knowledge in light of the truth and the proper relationship of goods to one another. It judges according to what is right or wrong, and uses the overall good of the human person, his spiritual destiny, and his salvation, as the basis of all judgement.

Applying Wisdom

Wisdom is a virtue not only for a monarch or political leader. Most people have authority in some area of life, and thus the need for wisdom: not only political and financial authorities exercise authority, but so do teachers and doctors, cooks and mechanics, wives and fathers, brothers and sisters. In any human relationship, there is the need for wisdom, to judge with the gift of discernment in light of the greater good. But the human person is also responsible for himself. He must judge himself, distinguish in his own life right from wrong, and discern rightly what is for his greatest good, that is, what will lead to his salvation. Here, the wisdom of the experts cannot determine his judgements. The

public health expert will tell him not to smoke, to use a condom, and to wear a mask. The financial expert will tell him to save early for retirement, to diversify his portfolio, and to budget for children. The Biblical scholar will distinguish the earliest redactions, show cultural influences, and question the original text. Some of this knowledge is useful, but the wise person must organize it with a view to what is true, what is good, and what leads to his salvation. He must discern wisely. Expert knowledge cannot replace wisdom, but is its servant.

Wisdom and the Kingdom of God

By placing today's Gospel of parables about the Kingdom of God (Matt 13.44–52) after the story of Solomon's wisdom, the Church makes an interpretive connection by which these parables further specify what is meant by wisdom. Wisdom is choosing the Kingdom of God above all things, making it the key to discernment, the principle of organizing the hierarchy of goods.

As much as Solomon embodies wisdom, Jesus is Wisdom himself, "one greater than Solomon" (Matt 12.42). The cornerstone of Jesus's preaching and mission is to proclaim the Kingdom of God (see Matt 4.17), which is articulated in the parables of today's Gospel. The Kingdom of God is an often-elusive notion that is actually clarified by the gender-neutral alternative "Reign of God." The Kingdom of God simply means the reign, or rule, of God over creation, and most importantly, over souls. Kings do not have citizens, rather they have subjects, and their subjects accept the rule of their monarch. In the first reading, wisdom was an attribute of King Solomon who ruled his kingdom. In the Gospel, wisdom prompts one to accept the rule of God, his sovereignty over one's life. The final parable in the Gospel illustrates that, in this age, those who accept God's rule coexist alongside those who do not. At the end of the age these two will be separated. The wise will be those found to be in the Kingdom of God and will attain life. The others will meet their destruction.

While personal autonomy and independence are valorized today, in reality, all people submit themselves to one ruler or another by choosing how to prioritize their judgements. What we make our greatest good is the ruler to which we submit. Many are ruled by riches and the pursuit of wealth. For others, it is pleasure or its less obvious and more insidious companion, comfort. For others it could be honor, fame and adulation, found diversely in the academy or in social media. Political movements and ideologies are perhaps more fashionable and acceptable, but can just as easily rule over souls: white supremacy and communism are easily recognized, while others are more subtle. As much as the human person pursues and proclaims freedom, the truth is that we are all ruled by something. The only question is by what, or by whom.

Wisdom is to choose the right ruler. The Gospel says that wisdom is choosing to be ruled by God, to be subjects of the Kingdom of Heaven, to make the Kingdom of God our greatest good. It is represented as the treasure in the field and the pearl of great price, which the wise person gladly trades everything for. The Kingdom of God is the ultimate value and thus becomes the organizing principle of our judgements. It is the key to true discernment. We ought to exchange everything to acquire it, all that we have and all that we are. It is more precious than any worldly possession or attainment.

The idea of being ruled carries a bad odor in our times. It seems at best restrictive and at worst oppressive. But that is not the biblical view of the Kingdom of God, which is understood to be a liberation from the oppression of worldly rulers. Jesus's mission to bring the Kingdom of God is understood as liberation from captivity and oppression, as freedom from the slavery to sin (see Luke 4.18–20). The rule of God brings peace and happiness, the abundant life, so that the one who finds the treasure in the field goes to sell all he has "out of joy." To be ruled by God is not to be crushed, but to be set free. As Kathryn Tanner so rightly understands, God's agency is not in competition with human agency. As God's power increases in a person, so does that person's own power. God's agency and human agency are not in an inverse, but a direct relationship. To be ruled by God is to be brought into the fullness of our humanity.

The Psalm of today's Mass is a selection of verses from Psalm 119, the longest of the Psalms and a hymn of praise of God's Law. It expresses this view poetically: "the law of your mouth is to me more precious than thousands of gold and silver pieces . . . Let your kindness comfort me . . . Let your compassion come to me that I may live." To live under the reign of God, under his law, is not a burden, but the highest liberation. It is to live under the rule of the One who is compassionate and kind, who brings comfort and life. Wisdom is to live under the law of the Lord and to treasure it above all earthly goods.

King Solomon asked for and received the gift of wisdom: an understanding heart to judge God's people and to distinguish right from wrong. In current parlance, this is discernment, judging rightly according to a proper understanding of goods in the light of the Holy Spirit. A wise person sees the value of the Kingdom of God and gives everything to place himself under God's rule. Wisdom is to make that Kingdom the ultimate value and the highest principle of discernment, to be ruled by God rather than any worldly power. Allowing ourselves to be ruled by God will lead to life, while choosing any other ruler will lead to death. To be wise is to choose the path to life.

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For Further Reading

- ***Bishop Robert Barron, "[What is the Kingdom of God?](#)"***
- ***Andrew Seeley, "[What is Wisdom?](#)"***
- ***[Thomas Aquinas, S.T. II-II, Q. 45.](#)***

In Short . . .

- ***Wisdom is the ability to judge rightly according to reason and the Holy Spirit.***
- ***Wisdom places acquired knowledge in a proper hierarchy of goods.***
- ***Christians cannot rely entirely on the knowledge of experts. They must organize genuine expert knowledge according to what is true, what is good, and what leads to salvation.***
- ***The Kingdom of God is God's reign over creation, especially over our souls. It is a liberation from the rule of sin and an entrance into the divine order of God's love.***
- ***The Kingdom of God is not opposed to human freedom, but rather God's reign leads to human fulfillment.***