
Solomon answered,
"Give me a heart that listens so that I can judge your people
and tell the difference between good and evil.
After all, who can judge this great people of yours?"
1 Kings 3:9 (NOG)

In our First Reading this day (1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14) we have the well-known story of "Solomon praying for wisdom." In our minds we may sometimes see this a bit like a scene from 'Aladdin' – where some powerful entity appears to grant a person whatever they wish. We will unpack this a little in a moment....

But – taking up the idea of 'wishes being granted' – if someone who had the power to grant you any 'wishes' did appear, what would you wish for? Honestly, what would you ask for? In some situations, we can easily imagine someone asking for some 'material thing' – perhaps more money, a home, meaningful work, a car, or some such things. Others may think of better health for a loved one or oneself. Others may think of restoration of a broken relationship. Some may think more broadly – remembering all the troubled places in the world needing peace (such as Ethiopia and Afghanistan etc), and many who are struggling simply for food at this time (such as the hundreds of thousands in Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, South Sudan, Yemen, etc).

As children (and even as adults) we often dream about 'what we may wish for'. What would you wish for if you could wish for anything?

As we think about 'wishes being granted' we may also think about our attitudes to those in government and others in authority. How often have we spoken in a way as seeing 'governments' (or businesses) as places that should 'grant our wishes'...?

It is this idea of 'wishes being granted' and 'good government – as well as acknowledging God as the One who is truly powerful and in authority – that stands in the background of our Bible Reading for this day (what we often remembering as "Solomon's prayer for wisdom"). But it is helpful to remember the real background to this Reading.

Solomon has just become king of Israel. However, his becoming king wasn't a simple process. There were many court intrigues and competition between many rivals (1 Kings 1-2). A few people lose their lives in Solomon's consolidation of power, including David's older son, Adonijah (who, in spite of what David had said, wanted the throne himself).

In some ways, it's a bit like today. Politics is about 'politics'. And it is only after a lot of intrigue that Solomon becomes king. The last days of David are described in 1 Kings 1 and here we hear about the infighting among David's sons and retainers. There is conflict between David's sons that leads to death with Solomon essentially 'the last man standing'. And soon after becoming King Solomon began his political alliances to cement the victories won by David in war. The first of these was a marriage alliance with Egypt by marrying one of the Pharaoh's daughters. And it is at this point that Solomon goes to Gibeon to offer sacrifices to the LORD.

Solomon goes to Gibeon because at this time the Tabernacle built by Moses was located in Gibeon along with the great altar upon which sacrifices had been offered since the days of Moses. But the Temple is to be in Jerusalem. 1 Kings 3:2 suggests that perhaps Solomon should not be at Gibeon ("Solomon loved the LORD by walking in the statutes of his father David, **but** he also sacrificed and burned incense on the high places."). It also seems that instead of Priests or Levites making the sacrifices, Solomon himself offers the sacrifices (1 Kings 3:3). And so, it could be perceived that God interrupts what Solomon is doing (and perhaps also is a hint at the 'fall' of Solomon to come...)

The LORD appears to Solomon and says, "Ask what I should give you." This is a remarkable offer for a young king; "Ask what you will," says God. What would you wish for if you could wish for anything? One can imagine what he might request: long life, riches, power, and victory in battle. However, Solomon asks for none of that. Instead, he praises God for His faithfulness to David, and then he describes his own situation. He is a young man. (Calling himself a "little child" is simply a way of expressing humility. Solomon is old enough to marry, cf. 1 Kgs.3:1). He has to govern a very numerous people; and not just any people, but a nation of God's own choosing. Therefore, he asks of God a "listening heart" (or, as many translations put it, "an understanding mind") in order to judge God's people, and "to discern between good and evil."

A listening heart, an understanding mind, the ability to discern what is right and good—these are qualities essential to be a good leader. It speaks well of young King Solomon that he recognises the enormous responsibility he has and seeks not money or fame or health for himself, but gifts of character that will benefit his people.

This story is the first of six Bible readings for the coming weeks that are associated with Solomon (i.e. Song of Solomon and Proverbs), and have to do with what is known in as 'wisdom'. "Wisdom" in the Bible has to do in large part with what Solomon requests: the ability to discern good and evil, the ability to listen well, and to judge and live rightly.

But it is important to note, however, that like David before him, Solomon has flaws. Later in life, he begins to worship other gods (1 Kings.11:4-8). He builds up his kingdom through forced labour and heavy taxes (1 Kings.11:28; 12:4).

And because of Solomon's sins, the northern tribes rebel after his death and the kingdom is split in two. Solomon, like his father before him, is a complex character. Solomon is like us in many ways, a mixture of 'good intentions' but 'failure in actions'. He is 'saint and sinner' at the same time. Perhaps his story can inform our own lives...

"What would you wish for if you could wish for anything?" Young Solomon, for all his shortcomings later in life, wishes for a 'hearing heart', that is wisdom to know what is 'right' and 'wrong'.

There is an old saying which is true in many ways: "There are two ways to learn in life; the easy way and the hard way". The intent of this saying is something along these lines: if we learn to listen to others (even people we might not 'like') we may learn things and maybe avoid certain troubles. However, if we choose to ignore wise advice from others (who have much life experience in certain areas) we are probably doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past. And Solomon epitomises both. He listens to God and His Word. But he also ignores it with all the problems that follow.

There is a prayer you may be very familiar with: it is known as 'The Serenity Prayer' and goes like this: *"God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other."* Our text this morning drops us in the midst of such a prayer.

In times of transition and change, it makes sense to ask God for guidance, and certainly for wisdom as we seek to figure things all out. To do so means that we acknowledge there is a higher power and we remember that we cannot do everything on our own. It also serves as our affirmation that we do not have to try to do so, for we have a guide and guardian, a companion on our journey in the one who loves us and calls us and claims us.

The Bible Reading today says that 'Solomon showed his love for the Lord by walking in the statutes of his father David'. However, when we look at both David's and Solomon's later lives, we see people who again and again and again failed to live according to 'the law'. And that is true. But perhaps their wisdom lies in acknowledging their sin, their failures, and their lack of trust in God at critical moments in their lives. Certainly, Solomon's Ecclesiastes is a reflection that without God life is 'meaningless'.

What would you wish for if you could wish for anything? There is a well-known Bible verse we all ought to know, Proverbs 9:10 (or 1:7, or the various other places it appears in the Bible): "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom."

Solomon prayed for a hearing heart. Jesus, the who was to come after Solomon and be the greater Solomon. Jesus shows us the “hearing heart”. It may be translated into our modern Bibles with the English word “understanding,” but in the Hebrew, it is simply “a hearing heart”.

In Luke Chapter 2 there is this verse (Luke 2:2) which says of Jesus “The boy grew up and became strong, filled with wisdom, and God’s grace was on Him.” Jesus heard words from His Father, and received them as gifts (John 14:10,24). Jesus speaks words to us—He is giving to us the gifts His Father gave to Him.

When we pray for wisdom, we are praying for a heart to hear the Gospel. We are praying that we may not turn into ourselves for deliverance from sin (to somehow ‘absolve ourselves’). Rather, the words we need to hear are the words spoken to us as gifts from Jesus that “your sins are forgiven” and “I assure you, whoever believes has eternal life.”

We hear those words. That’s what it means to be given a heart of faith—to receive these words. Then we discern the good. The good is word of life spoken by the Father through the Son. The good is the word of forgiveness, the decree that you are justified by the blood, the pronouncement from the mouth of Jesus that you are clean. This is the Gospel. To receive this Gospel with a hearing heart, this is wisdom.

You have an open invitation. Ask the Lord for wisdom. He is not greedy. He is not stingy. He will give and give generously. Ask him for wisdom to see the wrong and avoid it. And He will give it. Ask Him for the calm and confidence to find forgiveness in Christ and be at peace.

Wisdom, true wisdom, is knowing every day that Jesus is your Saviour. Wisdom is knowing that when we lay our weary head to rest at night, even if we were to die tonight, we would know where we end up. We would know that heaven is ours because of what Jesus has done for us. That is wisdom. Amen

O Lord, You are the giver of wisdom and true discernment. Move us to praise Your gracious will, for in Christ Jesus you have saved us from the deeds of death and opened for us the hidden ways of Your love. Open the eyes of our hearts that we may reach what You have promised; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.