

## **Sermon: Wise choices**

Before we start looking at today's Old Testament reading, I just want to pause for a moment, and invite you to think about what wise choices you've made. Maybe they've been big choices – who to marry, where to live, what to study. And maybe they've been not so big. What brand of coffee to buy. Whether to roll over that term deposit for twelve months or eighteen months.

But I wonder what it is that makes them wise choices? Good outcomes presumably. But there's something more, I think, to a genuinely wise choice than just a good outcome. Perhaps is the best outcome or the ideal outcome?

Many people, I think, consider that wise choices are the ones that make you the most money. Buying a holiday house on the central coast in the 80s or 90s. Buying Blackmores shares fifteen years ago. Moving from investing in shares to investing in property just before the GFC. And so on.

I remember talking to a plasterer a couple of years ago. We had our kitchen renovated and we were chatting from time to time while he was working. I have immense admiration for plasterers, and it's my least favourite handyman job. I look at some of the work I've done and cringe. I have got better at it over time. But between the mixing and the sanding and the clean up, it's horrible. And it's still not great, so I go back and put on another layer of plaster, and sand it back... and so on. But this guy could spread on some plaster, sand it smooth, and be done with it. A better result than I could ever achieve. So I think it was a wise decision to engage a plasterer for the kitchen rather than do it myself.

But as I said, I was talking to him, and he told me about his career. He'd learned the trade, set up his own business, took on bigger and bigger contracts, had people working for him, he stopped plastering and started managing other plasterers. It was successful, but it was also stressful. So he decided to wind up his own plastering business, picking up the tools and go back to work for someone else. He's a good plasterer – in fact, he's a great plasterer. He enjoys plastering, and people appreciate his work. The pay's not as good as the money he was making running the business, but he said all the stress has gone from his life.

I reckon that is a really wise choice. Not the best financially, but the wisest.

How does your wise choice stack up against the plasterer's?

In the lead up to today's reading from 1 Kings, at the beginning of Chapter 3, we learn how Solomon married the Pharaoh's daughter to cement an alliance with Egypt, and went to the city of David until he'd finished major constructions in Jerusalem – the temple, the palace and the wall around Jerusalem.

And while all this construction going on people were offering their sacrifices to God on the hilltops, the "high places".

Verse three tells us that Solomon loved the Lord, and followed the ways of his father King David. We read that Solomon went to one of the high places, the hilltop at Gibeon, about ten kilometres from Jerusalem to offer his sacrifices, and his sacrifices were very generous – verse four says a thousand burnt offerings.

There would have been a day – at least – of sacrifices and worship with crowds of attendants and followers priests assisting, and likely drummers and trumpeters too. But after that, things quietened down, they would have gone back to their tents. And finally Solomon went to sleep.

And the Lord came to Solomon in a dream. And God said to the new king "*Ask for whatever you want me to give you*". God is saying to him, effectively, "What is it you wish for?"

That's a staple of fairy tales and fantasy stories. The granting of wishes. Whether it's by a fairy Godmother, or a genie appearing from a lamp, or from the devil himself.

It is a great plot device. We can all relate to it! I think most people have thought about it from time to time. If you could have anything, what would it be?

Of course one of the common features of these stories is that the wish is often twisted around to the detriment of the wisher. So we learn that we need to be careful in what we wish for.

But here in 1 Kings, God himself offers to grant Solomon's wish. Solomon's a young king. A young king of a small and fragile nation. A king of a court which has a track record of intrigue and infighting and betrayal. A king of a nation with some fairly powerful – and not always friendly - neighbours.

So, for a king in such a position, there are an awful lot of things he might have wished for: security in its various forms – a mighty army, strong walls. Or the

defeat of the neighbouring nations. Or the death of all his foes in his own nation!

Or he might have asked for wealth. Or health and long life for himself.

But he doesn't ask for any of those things.

When God says "Ask for whatever you want me to give you." Solomon responds, first by letting God know the connection he has:

*"You have shown great kindness to your servant, my father David, because he was faithful to you and righteous and upright in heart. You have continued this great kindness to him and have given him a son to sit on his throne this very day." (3:6)*

God was faithful to David - and we can remember that David wasn't always a model king, but God was faithful to him regardless. And God's faithfulness to David extended to having his heir, Solomon, become king.

And then in this dream, Solomon admits his own frailty.

*"Now, Lord my God," he says, "you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number." (3:7-8)*

Being king of Israel is going to be a tough job. And there's only been two kings before him, Saul and David. So being a kingdom is quite new to the Israelites.

And then comes Solomon's request. His wish. The thing the Solomon wants more from God than anything else – verse 9: *"So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong."*

Or in the Good News translation *"Give me the wisdom I need to rule your people"*.

Solomon doesn't ask for wealth or power – although to some extent, as king of Israel, he has those things already. Instead of asking for wealth or power, he asks God for wisdom, for understanding, for discernment. The ability, I guess, to do his job well. To fulfil his calling as a servant of God.

It was a good answer. A very good answer. It was the right answer. And it pleased God: Verses 11-12 *"So God said to him, "Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your*

*enemies but for discernment in administering justice, I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be."*

His wish was granted. Solomon would have a wise and discerning mind. He would be a great and understanding and discerning king. And there would be no one like him again.

But ponder this for a moment: how much wisdom do you think Solomon had to start with?

Because his request was wise and discerning. In asking God for wisdom, perhaps Solomon was making the wisest choice of his life.

So maybe God had already granted his request.

Sometimes I think our prayers are answered even before we pray them.

As a result of Solomon making this wise choice, his reward is even more than expected.

God says to Solomon *"Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for—both wealth and honor—so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings."* (3:13)

If we go forward to Jesus' time, we read in the New Testament that Solomon was still the example of worldly glory and wealth and splendour. In Matthew's gospel Jesus says *"And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow; they do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his splendour was not dressed like one of these."* (Matt 6:28-29)

Not even Solomon. To Jesus' listeners, Solomon was unimaginably wealthy.

But in thinking about Solomon's wise choice, and God's great reward, we can often miss the proviso: *"...if you walk in obedience to me and keep my decrees and commands as David your father did, I will give you a long life."* (3:14)

We often think that Solomon asked for wisdom, but got wealth and power and health and long life as well. But that last one, that long life, is conditional: God says *"If you will walk in my ways, and keep my commands, then I will give you long life."*

As story of Solomon unfolds in 1 Kings, we see all of God's promises being fulfilled. We see Solomon's wisdom in action. We see his wealth and power increasing to levels never seen before.

But then things fall apart. If you flip forward a few pages in the bible, and get to chapter 11, we see things went wrong. Verses 9 and 10 tell us *"The Lord became angry with Solomon because his heart had turned away from the Lord, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice. Although he had forbidden Solomon to follow other gods, Solomon did not keep the Lord's command."*

Things went bad.

It seems that Solomon's wealth and power had gone to his head – and it was wealth and power on a truly epic scale: He had 700 wives and 300 concubines – and 2 Chronicles (9:13-21) tells us that among other things that every year King Solomon received over twenty-five tons of gold, in addition to the taxes paid by the traders and merchants. The kings of Arabia and the governors of the Israelite districts also brought him silver and gold...

All of King Solomon's drinking cups were made of gold, and all the utensils in the Hall of the Forest of Lebanon were of pure gold...

King Solomon was richer than any other king in the world.

But we can see the wealth and power had pushed aside the wisdom for which Solomon had originally asked.

Wisdom might be knowing the right thing to do, but it takes more than simply wisdom to do the right thing.

The example I always come back to is cigarette smoking. For more than fifty years we've been teaching kids that smoking is unhealthy. Every ten year old has known for years and years that they shouldn't smoke... so why does anyone ever start smoking?

We all need wisdom to discern the right way... and then we need to follow it.

We're faced with choices in all sorts of things every day. Some are frivolous. Some are critical.

If we were confronted by God's offer today, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you", how would we respond?

God has, of course, given us the sure and certain hope of life in him through the death and resurrection of Jesus, but it's easy to forget that and to come up with lists of things that we'd like. We'd like good health and long life. We'd like financial security. We'd like Covid restrictions to end. We'd like our children, our families to be happy. We'd like them to be successful.

Or as a congregation, what would we like? More people in church on? More money in the offertory? A Sunday school full of children. The quick completion of the life and witness so that we can get on with calling a new minister of the word?

Would we ask for those things? Or would we ask for wisdom?

As Solomon put it *"give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong"*.

Would we make the same wise choice?

Now, I suspect that we won't be confronted by God in a dream with the offer "Ask for whatever you want me to give you", but that doesn't mean the offer isn't there. What is it that we pray for?

Do we pray for things we'd like? Or do we pray for God's wisdom?

As Jesus said (Matt 6:33) *"But seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."*

Does God always answer our prayers? Sometimes it seems not. And there are all sorts of explanations why that might be. But I've heard it suggested that God does always answer prayer.... But that sometimes the answer is "No".

I'm not sure that's right or fair, but I am sure that sometimes the answers to prayer aren't what we expect. I haven't been able to find the original source for it, but there's this testimony attributed to a confederate soldier which speaks to prayers being answered in unexpected ways:

*I asked for strength that I might achieve; but I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey.*

*I asked for health that I might do greater things; but I was given infirmity that I might do better things.*

*I asked for riches that I might be happy; but I was given poverty that I might be wise.*

*I asked for power that I might have the praise of men; but I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God.*

*I asked for all things that I might enjoy life; but I was given life that I might enjoy all things.*

*I got nothing that I had asked for, but everything that I had hoped for.*

*Almost despite myself my unspoken prayers were answered; I am, among all men, most richly blessed.*

So in closing, what is it that we ask God for today? As individuals and as a congregation. Do we seek first the kingdom of God? Will we make our own wise choices, and have the strength to follow them through?

To the glory of God.

Amen.