

Sunday 25
20/9/2015

Mark the Evangelist

James 3:13-4:8

Psalm 1

Mark 9:30-37

The wise way

T. S. Eliot once wrote of

...The endless cycle of idea and action,
Endless invention, endless experiment,
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness;
Knowledge of speech, but not of silence;
Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word.
All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance,
All our ignorance brings us nearer to death,
But nearness to death no nearer to GOD.
Where is the Life we have lost in living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?
The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries
Bring us farther from GOD and nearer to the Dust. (*The Rock*)

...“the wisdom we have lost in knowledge.”

James writes of such wisdom in our reading this morning. Wisdom is often thought to be a supercharged version of knowledge, or the *accumulation* of knowledge and so something which comes with time and age. On this understanding, wisdom is a *natural* thing which comes with experience.

There is, of course, some truth in this. Anyone not learning from life is not paying enough attention. And yet Eliot observes in his poem:

*...The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries
Bring us farther from GOD and nearer to the Dust.*

Time might yield knowledge, but not necessarily wisdom; it can be that there is “Life we have *lost* in living.”

For James – and likely also for Eliot – wisdom is not so much the result of having learnt many things or the experience which comes with the passage of a lot of time but the result of having learned only *one* thing.

“Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom... do not be boastful and false to the truth... the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.”
(James 3.13-17)

The “one thing” which is wisdom is living peaceably, with gentleness, mercy and humility. Such wisdom is as much a possibility for those who’ve lived only a short time, as it is for their grandparents.

It is easy to *impress* with great knowledge, or with rhetorical skill, or with political shrewdness, or with artistic talent, or with technical ability – any one of which might be construed as a kind of wisdom.

But James’ point is that wisdom does not *impress* so much as quite simply *effect* healing and wholeness between God and people. Or, to invert this, where healing and wholeness – *reconciliation* – between people occurs, wisdom is present and active.

We gather today after worship for the first of perhaps 5 or 6 such meetings over the next year or so to think together about the mission of this congregation, and this in connection with the resources we have. What is the place of wisdom in this adventure?

We are intending to pay quite a lot of money for expertise to assist us – providing perhaps “knowledge” in Eliot’s discrimination between information, knowledge and wisdom. There are, doubtless, also a few “experts” sitting in our pews possessing perhaps knowledge, perhaps even a kind of wisdom, about these things, although not necessarily always as James has described it.

The thing about expertise, however, and the kind of wisdom which comes from experience, is that it is either neutral or risks binding the future with the past. Numbers and graphs tell us how things are but not what to do about them. Wisdom springing from experience can remind us of what happened in the past, but this cannot be allowed to bind our hands for the future. Expertise and experienced opinion will only get us so far in matters of God’s reign: As Eliot puts it,

All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance,
All our ignorance brings us nearer to death.

But the alternative is not – perhaps is never – to invoke the pious “What Would Jesus Do?” in this situation. For the *gospel* is not that Jesus was wise, even if by most measures he was. It is not that he was wise in the sense of clever, and so knew how to calm and pacify. Rather, the gospel is that Jesus *is* the wisdom of God, in James’ terms. Jesus is the *means* of peace, humility, gentleness. We fall into religious sentimentality if we reduce our understanding of Jesus to adjectives: that he was wise or humble or gentle or merciful, and that we should be too.

The gospel, however, is not sentimental; Jesus – Christ crucified – *is* wisdom (the noun) and through Jesus God verbs us into humility and mercy. With God, wisdom is not a laudable thing we might have or acquire but the very means of creation. Godly wisdom *creates* gentleness and humility.

“Who is wise and understanding among you?” James asks. He answers, the one who brings peace, gentleness, mercy.

But how is this actually possible when it comes to real, communal life with its struggles and tussles? How is it possible to engage in this way when extraordinarily important things are at stake in a community? As we discuss what we must over the next year or so, are we not really talking about Truth, and Salvation, and Judgement and Vocation into Mission? What is the place of gentleness and mercy when Everything hangs in the balance? What is the place of humility and peace when it is obvious – at least to me and

those who agree with me – that everyone else just doesn't get it and is running blind and heading for catastrophe?

It is a matter of whether we imagine ourselves to be *preparing* for mission, or *engaged* in mission in the very decision-making process itself.

We all know, I suspect, that if we lost it all – our property and our cash reserves – the congregation would still be church. Or we *think* we know this because it is only theoretical until it happens. But the point is that, for each of us, we are entering now into the possibility that some dimension which has been important to us about Mark the Evangelist and its parent communities might be lost.

And our problem, as we begin to negotiate all of this, is that we have to *decide together* what that loss will be. This is what threatens to make it difficult.

If the Synod got stroppy and just took it all away, we would have a common enemy and, sitting together in this space, we would be bound together by the logic that the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

Or, if by an act of God – so called! – the whole plant were wiped from the face of the earth and our insurance policy was found to have lapsed, we would have in common the affliction of circumstance, and be bound by the need to encourage and comfort each other.

But we have to *decide* – to *cut* (de-caedere: to cut off) – which is very different. In deciding, we take on responsibility. In taking on responsibility, we can be called to account. Common enemies and common affliction *bind us together* as they change our situation; taking decisions within a community about the future of the community has the potential to *divide*. (We have seen this this week: there is no such thing as a bloodless coup! In a coup there is no gentleness, no mercy, no peace, even as it seems the “wise” thing to do).

Some of you will be put out because we did decide to retain the tower for the Kingdom, or because we did not. Some because we maintained Hotham Mission in its current form, or did not. Some because we stayed on site, or moved to a rental property. This is how broad our thinking will be.

This is what James' teaching on gentle wisdom requires of us in relation to what lies ahead: decide *now* what your response to the congregation's final decision will be. Not *decide what option we should take up*, but *decide how you will respond to the community's decision, knowing that it might not be the “wise” one in your view*.

How is this possible? How is it possible to decide *now* before you even know what the outcome will be?

This is only possible if the specific shape of the outcome does not finally matter, if the wisdom which will be active among us is not that in 9 or 12 or 36 months' time we got the best solution, but that we grew closer together, that different experiences and expectations and desires and needs did not divide us from each other but bound us more closely.

To decide now how you will receive our final decision is only possible if Paul is right: that in all of this there is neither temple nor tent, mission nor worship, justice nor righteousness, for all are one in Christ Jesus (cf. Galatians 3.28).

This is to say, more bluntly, that God probably doesn't much care what we decide. I imagine God to be very *curious* about what we will do, but whatever the decision God's response will be the same: I can work with that. Luther remarked once that this God can shoot a crooked arrow and ride a lame horse. We are the arrow; our balance sheets are the horse.

None of this is to say that there is not hard work to be done, that we should not gather the information, convert it into knowledge and apply the wisdom of experience and insight as part of the whole process. And neither is it the case that the process itself is all that matters; it is only that the process and the goal must cohere. Some future reconciling mission is only achievable by reconciling means.

Which brings me back to something said earlier, now said more directly: we are not entering into a *preparation* for mission; we will be *engaged* in mission in the very decision-making process itself. This *is* our mission as much as anything else – to do the work which just happens to fall us here and now in such a way that gentleness and mercy and peace are both the means and the end.

In fact, we enact this each week as we gather around the table. There can be no sharing there week after week if it all falls apart in the meetings, and at the end. For as we put out our hands for bread and cup we declare that we are bound together because my friend Jesus is also the friend of my enemy.

And so God says to us through James: humble yourselves, that God may lift you up; let go, that you might find yourself held, whatever it seems you might be falling into. Let God's wise way become your way, as he draws near to you, creating gentleness, humility and mercy.

By God's grace, may that peaceable wisdom not be found by us to have been in vain, but rather to be bearing good fruit among all God's people. Amen.
