

Chichester Cathedral
The Fourth Sunday before Lent, 10.00am Mattins, 10 February 2019

I remember a radio interview with a bookmaker, in which he was asked his views on why people placed bets on such things as the outcome of general elections. Was it the hope of some ready cash, the interviewer suggested? Or a wish for a bit of extra excitement, and the thrill of the risk? The bookie's view was that these things were *part* of the answer, but the key thing, he thought, was committing oneself to a public judgment – in the hope that you could then say, 'I could see what was coming. I knew how it was going to turn out. I was right.'

Of course the need to be right has a flip side – the fear of being wrong. And I know from long experience of adult education, both within and outside the church, that wishing to be right all the time, and finding it uncomfortable to acknowledge how much we don't know, or have got wrong, are real impediments to learning.

I have begun in this way because there is so much in our readings today about *wisdom*. Our first reading, indeed, was from the 'Wisdom of Solomon', and our second encouraged us to 'teach and admonish one another in all wisdom.' 'The beginning of wisdom,' we have heard, 'is the most sincere desire for instruction.' But wanting instruction means acknowledging your ignorance, and that can be difficult for adults. Children, it is accepted, have much to learn, but once you're an adult you're just supposed to know.

Having, as I said, spent many years involved in Christian education and learning, beginning well before my time here at the Cathedral, I've often had occasion to challenge this understanding of adulthood by pointing out that the Greek word for 'disciple' means something like 'student', 'pupil,' and 'apprentice.' Being a disciple and follower of Christ is intrinsically about being a learner, whatever your age. The gospels are full of stories of the first disciples misunderstanding and getting it wrong, as Jesus teaches and admonishes and encourages. There is something encouraging about this, but it's also a salutary warning against the tone of strident certainty one sometimes hears in religious discourse – and indeed in other areas of life.

Luke's Gospel describes Jesus as growing up, 'filled with wisdom' (Luke 2.40). We also hear Jesus reflecting as an adult on how many who come to hear him fail to really attend to what he is saying. Jesus compares them unfavourably with those such as the Queen of Sheba who in the past came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon. But now, he says, 'something greater than Solomon is here'. (Luke 11.31)

So what is this 'wisdom' that Jesus exhibited, and in which we are all called to grow and develop throughout our lives? It is often said that wisdom is different from factual knowledge, but in what way?

Here an analogy with the practice of medicine may be helpful. Not least because there are connections between the way medicine cures physical ailments, and the power of God as an agent of spiritual healing and human transformation.

Both medicine, and Christian discipleship, require a wisdom that is made up of three components: information, skilled judgement, and trust. Let's look briefly at each:

First, information and factual knowledge. For medicine, of the human body and the processes of health and disease. For discipleship, about scripture, the creeds, and the way the church has interpreted these and translated them into practice.

Second, the need in both medicine and discipleship for skilled judgement, if they are to be effective; the ability to identify what is relevant for particular situations. Of course neither doctors nor disciples always get in right, but each are committed to learning from evidence and experience, for the benefit of others.

Third, there is unlikely to be physical healing if the patient has no trust in the doctor, nor spiritual healing if there is no trust in God, or in the life, work and worship of the church. We are not talking blind obedience here; we know there are examples of malpractice in both medicine and church, but it would be an overreaction to lose all trust, and turn to shamanism or paganism.

So then, in both medicine and discipleship there is knowledge, but that knowledge is not complete. There are unknowns and risks, and a need for trust and compassion. Understanding this is what wisdom is all about. It is not about an obsession with being right, but nor is it about floundering around in the dark. For experience and evidence reveal to us that the practice of medicine, and the grace of God seen in Jesus Christ, are both effective for healing and transformation.

If I may speak personally for a moment, I feel today a deep gratitude for the grace that I have received through participating in the worship and work of this cathedral church over eleven years, four months, and ten days! Whether I am any wiser now than when I came is not for me to say, but I've certainly learnt much that I will take with me to my new life as Dean of Portsmouth.

And, by the grace of God, I retain a desire to continue to learn, for I know that my fundamental calling is as a Christian disciple, a student, pupil and apprentice of Christ, just as it is for all of us here this morning. So indeed, as our second reading from Colossians put it, let us 'Bear with one another' in humility and compassion. 'Let the word of Christ dwell in [us] richly; [let us] teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and [an appropriate sentiment in a service of choral Mattins, let us] with gratitude in [our] hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.'

AMEN

Canon Dr Anthony Cane, *Chancellor*