

### ***Filled with Wisdom***

In the name of him in whom we have obtained an everlasting inheritance, dear friends in Christ: Sometimes it's not easy to see a connection between the Scripture readings for a given Sunday, but that's not the case with today's Old Testament and Gospel lessons. In both we have young men who are heirs to the throne of David who are seeking wisdom from the Lord.

The first, as we heard, is Solomon; who was both the Lord's and his father David's choice to succeed him as the King of Israel – which was a surprise to most people back then. Recall that Solomon was David's second son by Bathsheba – the woman with whom he committed adultery and whose husband he had murdered. On account of this unpleasant history there was a stain on Solomon's pedigree in the eyes of many. In addition to this, when King David got involved in that sordid affair, he had already long been married to seven other women all of whom had born sons to him who were potential heirs to his throne. They would have been in their twenties or so when Solomon came along. So when David died, maybe fifteen years later, Solomon would have been in his mid-teens, not quite grown up, while his older half-brothers would have been serving in important positions in David's administration for the whole time Solomon was alive. Because of their seniority and experience (not to mention their more legitimate claim) any one of them would have been more qualified to rule the nation. Just about everyone thought so, anyway. And make no mistake, several of these princes thought so too.

But God had other plans. And his choices often go against human reason. Thus according to his design the crown fell to Solomon, who was no doubt very conscious of his comparative inexperience and inadequacies. It's safe to say also that there were a lot of people looking for reason to find fault in him and hoping that he would fail as king so that another more worthy candidate could step in and do the job right. Talk about pressure: as Solomon stepped up to the plate to assume his role as king, he was under tons of it.

Fortunately, he knew what to do with it. Rather than attempt to bear the burden himself on his own puny shoulders, he hands things over to the Lord. He begins his reign with a lavish display of worship and thanksgiving to God, offering up a great many sacrifices. He's making it clear: he intends to rule as a man under the Lord's authority, and he means for his subjects to likewise dedicate themselves to serving the Lord. And lest we think his over-the-top acts of devotion were merely window dressing to impress people with his religious piety, the text earlier explains that Solomon was a young man who genuinely loved the Lord. His worship is sincere, and so is his inherent trust in the Lord. He believed that the Lord who graciously raised him to the office of king would also graciously equip him to serve well in that position.

And this morning we heard how. The Lord appears to him in a dream by night and says, "Ask what I shall give you." It is the ultimate blank check. Solomon can have anything his heart desires: instant fame, vast fortune, a sprawling empire that surpasses anything ever seen in the ancient world – whatever he wants. Think about it: what would you do with an offer like that? What would you ask for if the Lord told you he would give you *anything* you wanted? The impulse, of course, would be to ask for something selfish: What *I* want that will serve *me*, make *my* life better, and put *me* on the top of the world. It's the way we are. That's what makes Solomon's request so remarkable. He asks for something not for himself but rather that will enable him to better serve others. He says, "Lord, you've made me king over your people.

Give me a wise and understanding heart so that I can rule over them properly.” His request is for their benefit, not for his own. And Solomon’s request very much pleased the Lord. It’s easy to see why. It was said of his father, David, that he had a heart after the Lord. And now we see it in the son as well: asking for a gift that equips one to serve others reflects the Lord’s own attitude and priorities. It’s how he treats us – as Jesus himself said, “The Son of man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.”

Thus the Lord happily granted Solomon’s request and filled his heart and mind with wisdom from on high. He also gave him the things he neglected to ask for: great wealth, fame, power, earthly splendor, and so on – Solomon got it all; but we need to focus on that first gift: divine wisdom. What exactly is it? To answer, in general, we distinguish between knowledge and wisdom. The first has to do with *what* you know, the body of information you have amassed in your head. Wisdom, on the other hand, is more of an innate quality. It has to do with being able to *apply* what you know and use it in beneficial and efficient ways. Say it another way: the opposite of knowledge is ignorance. And ignorance can be cured through education. You can learn what you don’t know. The opposite of wisdom, however, is folly or foolishness. It’s much harder to cure. There are a lot of people who are very bright, who naturally learn quickly and know a great deal; but who display little or no wisdom. They consistently make bad decisions. Their sense of judgment is skewed. The choices they make are ruinous for themselves and others. Their plans never work out as intended. Now it’s true that some wisdom can be gained through experience. We learn from our mistakes – or at least we should; but some people never seem to learn. They keep repeating the same mistakes over again. And we are right to identify them as fools.

But all that I’ve said so far about wisdom applies to the earthly kind of it. And Solomon got that; but more importantly, God gave him *divine* wisdom. This is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It’s the ability to rightly understand the Holy Scriptures and properly divide God’s Word of truth. It includes the ability to discern what is truly good and what is evil beyond the immediate appearance of things. Not everything that looks good is; and not everything that appears to be evil really is. Certainly we see this in the later ministry of Jesus. Pharisees piously praying and scrupulously trying to keep the entire Law of God looked good on the surface. Everyone held them up as models of religious devotion. But their prideful self-righteousness was spiritual poison. It was leading them to destruction and blinding them to the truth. On the other hand, wretched sinners confessing their guilt and being baptized in the brackish water of the Jordan, or worse, Jesus himself suffering on the cross, beaten, bloody, dying – these things don’t appear so good; but they are life and salvation.

Divine wisdom is the ability to see God’s power hidden in weakness, to find his grace and purpose in suffering, and to behold the glory of God not in displays of brilliant splendor, but rather in loving, self-sacrificial service. In short, divine wisdom is Jesus Christ and his Gospel of salvation by grace through faith in him. This is with what the Lord filled young Solomon, and it enabled him to be the greatest king in Israel’s history – at least, until the final king came along.

That’s what we have in today’s Gospel reading, as young Jesus, only 12 years old, sits among the Bible scholars in the Temple. He sits there like a sponge absorbing divine wisdom from the scrolls of Sacred Scripture as they are being read and explained. Now, a lot of people misunderstand this story. They assume that Jesus, being God and the author of the Holy Scriptures, already knows everything there is to know about them. They imagine that young Jesus is teaching the scholars. But that isn’t what the text says. It says that he is listening to the teachers and asking them questions. That is to say, he’s the one who is learning. He is being filled with wisdom that’s coming to him from the outside.

And it's important that we understand this. Though Jesus is both true man and true God, the Scriptures tell us that during the time of his earthly life and ministry, Jesus largely emptied himself of his divine powers and prerogatives. In order to be our substitute, a man to die in our place on the cross, he had to live a perfect life as a man – a man with all of our human limitations except without sin. This is why the first of Jesus' miracles, changing water to wine at the wedding of Cana, doesn't happen until he's already begun his ministry and he's over 30 years old. It's also why you never see Jesus performing miracles for his own benefit. He only uses his divine power on a limited basis to serve the needs of others and to make teaching points.

So, going back to his childhood, this means he had to learn how to walk and talk and read and write, just like every other child. It also means he had to learn about God's plan and purpose for his life by hearing and reading the Sacred Scriptures, because that's what they're all about: God's plan to redeem the world by the death of his Son. This explains why Jesus is so hungry to sit among the Bible scholars and learn from them. You see, prior to this time in his life, when worshipping at the Temple in Jerusalem, he would have had to stay with his mother, Mary, on the court of Jewish women, along with his younger brothers and sisters. But now, having come of age, he was allowed to go with Joseph onto the court of Jewish men. We know that the family was here to celebrate the Passover. So this is the first time Jesus would have actually seen sacrifices being offered to the Lord. It fell to the men of each household to act as priests on behalf of their family. They would take their lambs to the priests who served at the Temple. The fathers would confess their sins and the sins of their family members to the priest who would then transfer those sins and place them upon the heads of the lambs. And then the lambs would be slain by a quick slice of a knife across the throat.

Jesus is seeing this for the first time – and by it, he's gaining insight. He's coming to understand what this form of worship is all about. It's dawning on him that each of these lambs bleeding and dying represent him: that just as they are being declared guilty for sins they didn't commit and being slaughtered as substitutes, so also that is what's going to happen to him. This is what he was born to do. So, naturally he wants to know more. And it just happens that another advantage of coming of age means that now Jesus can go to that part of the Temple where the renowned rabbis and Bible scholars hold forth with their teachings.

And the thing to see is that when they teach, Jesus, hearing them, is being filled with divine wisdom. And based on what was said before, that divine wisdom is Jesus and his Gospel of salvation, then we understand that to a certain extent Jesus is being filled with himself. Part of what was emptied from him in his entering our flesh to become our substitute is now coming back to him by means of the spoken Word. And just as Solomon was filled with divine wisdom that equipped him to serve the Lord's people in the office of king, now Jesus is being filled with divine wisdom that will equip him to serve God's people in the role of Savior. Now, that's not to say that everything he's hearing from the rabbis is helpful. Not all Bible teaching is sound Bible teaching. And then, just as today, a lot of it was just plain wrong. But Jesus had the advantage of having a mind unclouded by sin and its corrupting effects. When he heard God's Word, he was able to immediately ascertain its true meaning. He could separate the wheat from the chaff and quickly discern which teachers were speaking God's truth correctly.

This is more of a challenge for the rest of us. We *can* be deceived. But that's all the more reason we should be hungering and thirsting to be filled with divine wisdom so that we can be cleansed of sin and given the gift of spiritual discernment. This is vital. For God hasn't

called any of us to serve his people as king. Nor does he need any of us to serve in the role of Savior. Jesus has already taken care of that for us. But God has called all of us to serve in other roles. Maybe you're a spouse, a parent, a grandparent, or a child growing up in the home. God assigns certain responsibilities to each of these roles in the family. Maybe you're a baptismal sponsor, a Sunday school teacher, or you hold an office in the church. There are responsibilities for serving God's people in these roles too. And there are your other jobs and vocations, whatever they happen to be. You serve people in those roles too.

And listen: while the Lord doesn't necessarily come to you and make the same offer that he made to Solomon, "Ask what I shall give you" – probably because he knows most of us don't have the good sense to ask for what we should – he does very much want to fill you with divine wisdom by which he will equip you to serve others in the roles he has assigned you. It pleases him when, recognizing your own limitations to serve as you ought, you ask him to give you a wise and understanding heart – and too, when you seek this wisdom where it is found: in the teaching of his Holy Word. This is what will fill you with the very mind and wisdom of Christ.

A few days ago we began a new year. Traditionally, it's a time for evaluating the past and making resolutions for the future. My hope and prayer for all of us is that in the coming year we make the prayer of Solomon and the eagerness of Jesus to hear God's Word our own that we too may be filled with wisdom from on high and equipped and empowered by God to serve others. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***