

3rd Sunday before Advent
1 Kings 3: 1-15 and Romans 8:31-end
Mother Emma

Many traditional fairy-tales are predicated on the idea of someone being granted a wish – or sometimes even three wishes. What they choose as their heart's desire reveals a great deal about them – it can be a force for good in their own lives or in the lives of others, or it can be cruel or senselessly wasted. I particularly remember from my childhood the fairy story in which an old woman, granted three wishes by a fairy, wishes first for a delicious sausage for her supper; then, in a moment of irritation, that the sausage should be stuck to her annoying husband's nose, and eventually has to use up the third and final wish to un-stick it again, whereupon it disappears, leaving her with no more than when she began.

Our reading from the first book of Kings appears to follow this kind of pattern, as God appears in a dream to King Solomon, following the death of his father, David, and instructs him, "Ask what I shall give thee." In recent weeks, many of our readings have been concerned with the essential Christian virtue of humility and Solomon's response demonstrates this perfectly:

I am but a little child; I know not how to go out or come in.

How many of us, if offered a choice of gifts, would begin in this way? How many of us regularly think of ourselves as lacking in knowledge or understanding of the world, compared with those around us?

Solomon has discerned with humility that in his new role as King over Israel, God's chosen people, surrounded by advisers and powerful leaders with considerably more experience than he has himself, the greatest gift he can ask for is wisdom:

Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart to judge thy people, that I may discern between good and bad.

God, we hear, is pleasantly surprised that he has not asked for riches, power over his enemies or a long life – which tells us something about God's experience of sinful human nature! – and in response he grants Solomon not only great wisdom, but also the health, wealth and power for which he did NOT ask.

The news today is dominated by stories of the world's leaders, our own and those of other countries and superpowers across the world. Perhaps we might long for the globe to be governed by those who put understanding and wisdom ahead of anything else. As Christians, we are all called to serve others with humility, wisdom and understanding, and to live out these values in our lives, at home, at work, in society as well as within our loving Church family.

In the New Testament, God no longer asks human beings, whether leaders or not, what gifts they would like, as he has already given the greatest gift of all in his Son, Jesus Christ.

The difficult verse in our reading from Romans:

He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things...

is there to remind us that if God could go to the extent of seeing (and sharing in) Christ's suffering on the Cross, he will surely be with us and giving us the qualities we need in any of the challenges we experience. God's expectation that Solomon would greedily ask for riches, power or a long life, is enacted in the individual and corporate lives of humanity today.

Much of the media is taken up with suggestions or recommendations of how to achieve personal health or wealth; and humility and understanding of others are not the stuff of which social media posts or newspaper Saturday articles are formed. In a much wider context, we watch with fear and anxiety the threat of escalation in the war in Ukraine which might even lead to mass

destruction, or the threat of global catastrophe about which we are being warned as the result of our abusive and greedy use of the planet's resources. Are these the result of wisdom and understanding of others, or would the wishes of those in power be revealed as more like the ones God expected to hear from Solomon's lips?

It is for us as Christians to share God's teaching as we have heard it in today's readings - that it is when we seek wisdom to discern between good and bad, truth and dishonesty, right and wrong, that we are able to open our hearts to others, and together with them, to work for health, wealth and security for all.

Jesus was born into a life of relative poverty, with little power or authority in the world, apart from that which had been given to him by God, and his life was brutally cut short. Yet his teaching and example changed the world; his authority was recognised by many as divine and his sacrificial death and glorious Resurrection opened the gate of heaven to us all. As St Paul says, *In all (our sufferings) we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.* We have been given a gift which could answer our heart's desire, even if we have not articulated it.

Christ, who has lived and died among us, still walks beside us in our times of hope and fear. He loves us for who we are, he has shown that he was willing to sacrifice everything for us, and he longs for the knowledge of his love to transform us into people who follow his commandments to love and serve one another, exercising the gifts of wisdom and understanding, in the certain knowledge that none of the world's gifts or threats can have greater power than his love.

Many of us will have heard the words of Paul's conclusion spoken at funerals (it was certainly the main reading at my father's funeral, over thirty years ago), yet they apply to us every bit as much in life as in death:

Neither death, nor life, nor angels, no principalities, nor powers, not things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.