

# Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 20)

Text: James 3:17

If someone came to you and said, “You can ask for whatever you want and it will be yours”, what would you do? I’m sure you would say first of all, “Are you for real?” “Are you kidding me?” But once you have been assured that the offer is genuine, what would you ask for?

Would it be something to make life easier, would it be the extra cash to buy the things you've always wanted, a trip, a new car, an education for the children, new clothes, the ability to be generous to worthy causes? Would you have asked for good health, for success, perhaps a certain amount of notoriety so that people would take note when they hear your name?

I'm sure many of us would be put into an immediate dilemma if we were asked that fairy-tale like question, “You can ask for whatever you want and it will be yours” as we try to sort out what are the most important things we should request.

In the Old Testament God asked Solomon: “What would you like me to give you?” Solomon had difficulty answering. He said: “Give me the wisdom I need to rule your people with justice, and wisdom to know the difference between good and evil. Otherwise how would I be able to rule this great people of yours?” Wisdom - that's what Solomon wanted above anything else.

Sometimes we tell people to use their brains – we use this expression telling people to be wise in choosing right from wrong. Right decisions come from using your brains while wrong ones come from thoughtlessness and lack of common sense, poor judgement and an absence of wisdom. Common sense, good judgment, wisdom and using your brains have all come to mean the same thing.

Sometimes we confuse knowledge and wisdom. We think that the person who knows a lot about a certain subject is a wise person. We equate wisdom with knowing a lot. But the person who knows a lot can be a complete fool when it comes to dealing with other people. They can be a complete fool when they are asked to apply their knowledge to everyday situations. They can be a complete fool when it comes to using their judgement and when giving advice. They might be a complete fool when it comes to humility—they know they are smart and likes to let everyone know about it.

In the Old Testament we read: “The fear of the Lord (respecting, honouring, having reverence for the Lord) is the beginning of wisdom”. To be wise, first of all, is to

know God and to seek his will and give him honour and praise. We read this in the prophet Jeremiah, "Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight" (Jeremiah 9:23,24).

There are many people who believe that there is a god, they believe that there is some kind of supernatural being behind our world, they will even go so far as to call this supernatural being "God".

But to really know him as the God who cares for us, who forgives and brings us life and salvation, who loves us so much that he sent his only Son to die on a cross in our place, who is a loving heavenly Father who is deeply concerned about every moment of our lives here in this life and in the life to come, that he is available to us in a personal way, that he touches our lives in an everyday kind of way, that he is there beside us on the mountains tops and in the darkest valleys –to know God like this is the beginning of wisdom.

To have wisdom is to live in a relationship of love and faith with our heavenly Father through Jesus Christ. Jesus has cleansed our consciences; he has swept away all that stands between God and us and restored our friendship with God. Wisdom means we can trust Jesus for our salvation. He has done everything for us freely on the Cross.

To be wise means trusting that at baptism God accepted us as his own. He declared himself to be our God. He has made that promise and will not go back on his word. Even though we daily, sin and disappoint God, he will not give up on us. That he has promised!! To know and trust that promise is to be wise.

To be wise is to know God, to love him, to trust him as the giver of all that we need, and to have faith in him as the saviour of our lives.

To be wise is to place Jesus at the centre and core of our lives and be committed to following him even though there are many who don't understand that kind of commitment and consider us fools.

There was a discussion panel on TV recently and one of the people on the panel openly mocked the Christian for their beliefs simply because they had no idea really what they were talking about. There was a clash of cultures and belief, and it was the Christian that was given the label "foolish" for believing in their so-called 'myth'.

But who really is the foolish person in this case? Life without God is simply unwise. In Psalm 14 it says: "*The fool says in his heart: "There is no God" (Psalm 14.1)?*

To be truly wise is to know what it means to live our lives for Christ. To be wise means knowing and doing just those things that reflect that we are in a special relationship with Christ.

In other words, wisdom has a very practical side to it. Since it is a wise thing to have Jesus as our Saviour, to know his love and constant care for us, it is also a wise thing to know the changes that our confession that "*Jesus is Lord*" brings to our lives.

Listen to James: "Is there anyone among you who is wise and understanding? They are to prove it by his good life, by his deeds performed with humility and wisdom.... The wisdom from above is pure first of all; it is also peaceful, gentle and friendly; it is full of compassion and produces a harvest of good deeds; it is free from prejudice and hypocrisy (James 3:17).

A wise person according to James is one who turns his back on every kind of evil. They are fully aware of their own selfish and natural drives that wants to be unkind and hurtful and boastful, and instead strive, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to be peaceful, gentle and friendly, full of compassion, producing many good deeds, free of prejudice and hypocrisy, to use the words of James.

A family had waited in line for some time to get a ticket. Just as they got to the ticket office a boy pushed into the line in front of them. The annoyed parents told the lad to go to the back of the line and wait his turn. He left and was back in a minute with his father, a determined looking man who said loudly to his son, "Stand here! Just tell me if anyone has anything to say about it!" This father was giving his son a lesson in worldly wisdom – how to get ahead regardless of the rights or feelings of others.

There times when all of us follow the wisdom of the world rather than the wisdom that comes from God. Whenever we do something that causes ourselves or someone else some hurt or harm, you can bet we have followed our own wisdom and forgotten the wisdom that comes from God.

Whenever we become selfish, argumentative, hard to get on with, squabble over the smallest things, you can bet that we are not following the wisdom of God. Whenever we refuse to listen to what others have to say, when we are no longer open to reason and just want our own way, when we lose all gentleness, and our feeling for others and their situation and we become hardened, you can bet we have followed our own wisdom. As James says, "The wisdom from above is pure first of all; it is also peaceful, gentle and friendly; it is full of compassion and produces a harvest of good deeds; it is free from prejudice and hypocrisy" (James 3:17).

It is true that too often we are fools; we are not as wise as we ought to be. We need to hear again and again that Jesus died for us and is alive to give us true and everlasting life for ourselves, that overflows and spills out for others. Eagerly hearing that message, and welcoming the one who speaks it to us, is living in true wisdom. Amen!