

## Wisdom: Combining Wisdom and Knowledge in the Post-truth Age

### Pent 13

#### Preached at Brunswick Uniting Church

Texts: 1 Kgs 2:10-12; 3:3-14 and Eph 5:15-20

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Conversations between Australians often begin with one of these two phrases:

“What do you know?” or “What are you up to?”

Usually, we are not interested in literal answers to the question.

They are sort of colloquial strategies we employ to get a conversation going.

But let’s think about what they are literally asking.

And when we do, we can see that they combine in an interesting way.

One is question about knowledge – what do you know?

The other is a question about behaviour – what are you up to?

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Knowledge and behaviour – one without the other is dangerous.

Knowledge that is for knowledge’s own sake is often associated with pride.

Behaviour – or action or ethics or morality – devoid of knowledge can fuel fanaticism.

Knowledge and behaviour – they belong together.

One of the categories for holding them together and integrating them is ‘wisdom’.

For instance, most of us accept that the people we recognise as wise *know* what to do with their knowledge.

And we would equally recognise that wise people do good and virtuous things with their knowledge.

Wise people can bring warring parties together. Wise people can detect dishonesty and expose hypocrisy. Wise people can use words to comfort, heal and inspire. Wise people can demonstrate how to live a good and fruitful life.

People we acknowledge as wise might be globally famous figures such as Nelson Mandela. They might be someone locally-known such as Lowitja O’Donohue or Rose Batty. And they might be your next-door neighbour, your best friend, or your mother or father, or brother or sister.

As we've already heard, wisdom is the theme that unites today's readings.

We heard Solomon's famous prayer for understanding. We read of the famous line from Psalm 111 that 'the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom'. And from the New Testament we heard the exhortation to "live not as unwise people, but as wise".

Solomon, Israel's third king; the builder of the great temple, the one who famously resolved the maternity claim disputed by two prostitutes, even if using a fairly high-risk strategy. Solomon – the one of whom it will be said just a few chapters later in 1 Kings – that people "came from all the nations to hear the wisdom of Solomon; they came from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom."

Whilst 1 Kings doesn't hold back in its praise of Solomon, it also lets its readers know that Solomon failed in wisdom. He went after foreign gods – the sin of idolatry for Jews. That failure on his part is blamed for the breakup of the Israelite kingdom during the reign of his son.

Yet let's not be too focused on Solomon – either his virtues or his vices.

The passage that we read finished on what is presented as God's response to Solomon's desire for understanding. This is the divine response:

Because you have asked for understanding, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what was right, I now do according to your word. Indeed, I give you a wise and discerning mind.

More important than *Solomon's* virtue is the God-given wisdom to do what was right.

And regardless of the idealisation of Solomon as *the* man of wisdom – what we see in God's response is the more fundamental point of the value God places on wisdom.

This is very important for understanding the theology of ancient Israel.

Too often we Christians have easily succumbed to the idea that the Old Testament is nothing but laws, rituals and violence. We really do have to let go of such a summary if we are ever to enter into the remarkable collection of literature that it is.

The importance of wisdom within that literature and its theology is highlighted by the fact that a whole cluster of books is designated as the wisdom literature: the Job, Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, and the Song of Songs.

This literature is perceived to constitute a category distinct from the books of the law, and the books the prophets.

What's the difference between them?

Where the literature grouped as law (such as Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy) is often in the form of commands, the wisdom literature reveals people engaging God through prayer, through struggle – sometimes anguished, painful and angry struggle – through questioning, through protesting.

This literature and God's endorsement of wisdom as something to pursue and seek is a reminder that for the Jewish people God is not known simply through the revelation of law but through intense, personally-invested and questioning encounter.

If I can just add a small footnote here: Thinking about the mix of literatures and theologies in the Bible is a helpful reminder to us that the Bible is much more than a book of knowledge waiting for us to extract bits and pieces of information. Reading the Bible is much more like eavesdropping on a conversation between different people with their different theologies reflecting together – sometimes calmly, other times vigorously – on the character of God, the nature of God's love, the purpose of the world and the role of human beings. To read the Bible is to be drawn into that conversation, and in our own way, become participants in it.

End of footnote!

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So, if wisdom has this role within Jewish faith, is it any different for Christians?

The summons in Ephesians 5 gives a window into the place of wisdom in the early Christian community.

Yes, it's a potentially jarring passage to contemporary ears. Its reference to alcohol hints at moralism. Its talk about 'spiritual songs' hints at pietism. But let's listen to the first half of it again:

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise but as wise, making the most of the time, because their days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

- The reference to wisdom is set precisely in instructions about 'how' to live.
- The days are evil – a snapshot of the foreboding apocalyptic context in which Christianity was born.
- Do not be foolish – the opposite of wisdom.
- Understand what the will of the Lord is – again wisdom links understanding with knowing and action.

I said that this is a snapshot, and that it is. Wisdom was a significant theme for the early Christians. Jesus was often presented in the New Testament and in early Christian theology as the wisdom of God.

And as Christianity moved into the world of Greek culture, it was necessary to clarify the meaning of wisdom. The Christians insisted that their notion of wisdom wasn't the same as the Greeks' notion of wisdom. This brought forth the famous declaration from the apostle, Paul, in the first of his letters to the Corinthians. Christ, he says, "is the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor 1: 24b-25).

Christ was the new definition of wisdom – so new, in fact, that it actually looked like its opposite: foolishness!

Jews appealed to wisdom as something different from law. Christians appealed to wisdom stressing that our understanding of God could not be confined to our categories of knowledge.

Wisdom generates ferment. It provokes questions. It inspires action. All the things that Jesus, the wisdom of God, did.

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‘What do you know?’ ‘What are you up to?’ Knowledge and action

The Old and New Testaments give us some interesting ways of reflecting on how to combine knowledge and action.

And perhaps it is timely for us to be thinking about this.

We’ve entered what is frequently being called the post-truth age.

In 2016, the Oxford Dictionaries declared ‘post-truth’ to be word of the year.

This was how they defined it: an adjective “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”<sup>1</sup>

This post-truth moment is characterised by such things as:

- Journalism being dismissed as fake news
- Clear evidence being dismissed outright
- Expert knowledge being maligned because it is expert
- Spin being normalised as a substitute for political debate.
- Race-baiting is given a voice in the Australian Senate under the guise of concern for national identity.

What, then, are the circumstances in which these tendencies emerge? One description is given by American philosopher, Lee McIntyre in his book *Post-truth*. They are circumstances which are political and ideological. He even speaks of post-truth as itself an ideological triumph of certain forces for which the denial of truth is essential. He writes:

“One gets the sense that post-truth is not so much a claim that truth *does not exist* as that *facts are subordinate to our political point of view.*”<sup>2</sup>

He also says this:

“The question at hand [in this post-truth moment] is ... how to make sense of the different ways that people subvert truth.”<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the bleakest picture of these circumstances comes from former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. According to Williams, the West has moved into a “‘dark night’ for intelligence”.<sup>4</sup> Williams says that our time is one in which, we “don’t quite know what knowing is for and we don’t even know that we can know”.<sup>5</sup> Maybe that’s a bit of hyperbole. But then I look at the result of the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016>, accessed August 18<sup>th</sup> 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Lee McIntyre, *Post-truth* (Cambridge, Mass; 2018), 11.

<sup>3</sup> McIntyre, *Post-truth*, 7.

<sup>4</sup> Rowan Williams, *Being Disciples* (London: SPCK, 2016), 23.

<sup>5</sup> Williams, *Being Disciples*, 23.

2016 US Presidential election. That result and the strategies which produced Trump's victory certainly suggest that we do indeed live in and through 'a dark night for intelligence'.

The ease with which knowledge is manipulated and the ease with which this manipulation triumphs suggests that Williams just might also be correct when he argues that "'we don't even know that we can know'. We are living in an age where if your facts are inconvenient to someone else, they can produce alternative facts.

The post-truth world thrives on people living in cultural, intellectual, and social silos, devoid of any common language or common vision or any common notion of truth.

What might deliver us from this disdain for the truth? More facts? Reason?

American writer Michiko Kakutani opens her recent book *The Death of Truth* with a reference to an address by Abraham Lincoln in 1838, long before he was President. In this speech Lincoln suggested that for America to protect itself from the rise of a home-grown tyrant springing up amongst us would require the nation and its institutions to be committed to "sober reason, cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason".<sup>6</sup>

I wonder if that, however, is part of the problem.

The words of Abraham Lincoln are a reminder of the confidence that 'sober cold, calculating, unimpassioned' reason enjoyed amongst the cultural, political and intellectual leaders of Europe and American during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They remind us of the Enlightenment – the movement that promised to deliver human beings from superstition, especially religious superstition by the use of 'reason'. Reason, they promised, would make us enlightened.

But is reason enough? Do we not also need wisdom?

Who knows how the post-truth age is going to play out? Certainly, we will need to recover some confidence in reason. We need some confidence, to echo Rowan Williams, that we are not trapped in not knowing that we can know.

It is right that we resist 'alternative facts'. We need the media to do the kind of 'fact checking' so despised by some politicians.

Our culture also needs wisdom. It needs the Nelson Mandelas and Lowitja O'Donohues and Rose Battys to do what biblical wisdom does: they generate ferment, provoke questions and inspire action and create confidence that there are right and virtuous ways to live.

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But what of the Christian calling in this context?

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<sup>6</sup> See Michiko Kakutani, *The Death of Truth* (London: William Collins, 2018), 21-22.

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What of our calling, precisely as Christians, to be wise, to be wise in the way wisdom is portrayed in the Bible?

Christianity actually occupies a rather odd place in the categories provided by the post-truth age. Remember the definition from the Oxford Dictionaries:

An adjective “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”

Many people would argue that that sums up Christianity. They would suggest that it fits right into the post-truth world. They think that Christianity has no interest in objective facts. That is all about emotion and private belief.

The contrast set up by the post-truth world is between facts and emotion. The suggestion is that we are only being truthful when we rely entirely on facts. The quest to defend truth against post-truth in these terms is quite dangerous. And the quest to defend Christianity against its critics in these terms is misguided. And the desire to understand Christianity in these terms is potentially futile.

We might produce and prove all the facts we could about Jesus – but so what?

The wider cultural discussions about the post-truth age can be a good prompt to think about the truthfulness of Christianity.

And I think the category of wisdom is a very useful one for doing so.

Earlier, I reflected on the place of wisdom theology amongst the other theologies of the Old Testament. I compared our reading of the Bible to eavesdropping on a conversation and joining in the conversation.

But Wisdom theology will also prompt us to do more than talk. Remember the summons from the letter to Ephesians:

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise but as wise, making the most of the time, because they days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

So what does wise Christian living look like?

I am always challenged when at the end of a worship service, the worship leader issues this particular challenge:

Go forth into the world in peace;  
be of good courage;  
hold fast that which is good;  
render to no one evil for evil;  
strengthen the faint-hearted;  
support the weak;

help the afflicted;  
honour all people;  
love and serve the Lord,  
rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.

I think that gives us a picture – in the form of a challenge – of what wise Christian living looks like. We can't prove its rightness by bolstering it with lots of facts. But nor do we live such lives driven only by our emotions or our private beliefs.

If someone asks a Christian 'What are you up to' – this could be part of the answer.

Underling this vision of wise Christian living is a cluster of convictions about the example of Jesus, the authority of Jesus to call us to such a life, and about the world and its needs as the context where Christian convictions are lived out. If someone asks a Christian 'What do you know' – these underlying convictions might be the answer.

We won't undo the post-truth world merely by living in this way, but we might sow the seeds of helping to create a society and societies where wisdom is honoured and where we and others might catch a glimpse of the strange wisdom of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Amen.

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