

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A. R. Cole

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost



19 August 2018

1 Kings 2:10-12,3:3-14

Psalm 111

Ephesians 5:15-20

John 6:51-58

“If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern.”

Words from William Blake in his poem, “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.”

There is a little YouTube video that shows a happy cement mixer driver finishing a delivery. He has a picture of his much-adored wife in the cab of his truck. Looking at it and his watch, he smiles and makes an impromptu decision to nip back home with the truck for some lunch.

On pulling up in his street in his huge cement mixer he is puzzled to see a brand new blue convertible sports car parked in his driveway. Parking the truck, he walks up the driveway and peers in through the front living room window. As he looks he sees his wife receiving a bunch of flowers from a very good looking young man in a suit. His wife is smiling, and she reaches up and kisses and embraces the man enthusiastically.

The lorry driver is immediately furious. He concludes his wife is obviously having an affair with this richer, younger, better-looking man. He looks back at the car and stomps off back to the cement mixer, which he backs up roughly into the blue convertible. He gets out, swings the cement chute over the car, and pushes a lever. The car starts to fill with cement. His face clearly shows that he is thinking, “There that will show them!”

He stomps back up to the front window to attract their attention and show them what he had done. To his surprise when he looks in this time there is a third person in the room with a TV camera. His wife and the young man are standing side by side, and the young man is unveiling a big golden card with the picture of the brand new sports car on it. He is giving the card to his wife who is clearly overjoyed. She sees the lorry driver and waves enthusiastically, pointing at the picture of the car and waving the keys. The lorry driver waves back with a sickly smile on his face and looks at the car, now full of cement! Things are not always the way we see them!

In this morning's lesson from First Kings, we hear that wonderful story of Solomon asking God for wisdom. “Give your servant, therefore, an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil.” That is the hard thing in every age but not least in our own, isn't it? How can we be wise? How can we discern accurately between good and evil, and how can we see things as they really are?

The difference between wisdom and foolishness is, in part at least, the same kind of difference as that between what is called exegesis and what is called eisegesis. These are terms that are normally applied to the study of the Bible. Exegesis is the process of drawing out the meaning from a text in accordance with the context and discoverable meaning of its author, whereas eisegesis is when a reader imposes his or her interpretation into and onto the text. In other words, exegesis seeks to know the truth that is there, whereas eisegesis seeks to find support for the opinion we already hold about what we believe is there.

You know the kind of thing. If you know what you want to find in the Bible, then you will discover a way of finding it there somewhere. We are always tempted to do this. Often with the Bible, but also with everything we see in the world around us. I think we can all see how different sides in today's debates can look at the same words and actions and read totally different meanings into them.

Reading our own shortcut interpretation into the world around us is a very human thing to do. Indeed it is a skill we rely on every day. Our minds have to look for familiar structures and meanings in the wild array of information out there, and our minds automatically simplify and make shortcuts all the time. They have to.

That is why we can still read those pieces of text that people construct with only a few correct letters here and there in an otherwise jumble of nonsense. With only a few familiar combinations and letters, our minds automatically fill in the rest.

It is also why we see all sorts of shapes in the clouds. We see them because our minds are continually scanning our surroundings for what we already know. It is also why the famous Inkblot Tests devised by the Swiss Psychologist, Hermann Rorschach, in 1921 show us how the state of our minds influence what we see. One person will see an angel, another a hideous face, in the same inkblot.

On a bigger scale, when we are happy and confident we read situations and people differently from when we are depressed or anxious. "When that person finished our conversation and moved on at that party, was it because I am boring or because what I was saying was objectionable to them, or was it simply because they had someone they really wanted to talk to because they hadn't seen them for a long time?" We have all had that experience, haven't we, of reading negatives into peoples' actions and attitudes towards us that, later, we discover we're not there at all.

Aldous Huxley, the writer of the book, *Brave New World*, picks up on William Blake when he says, "There are things known and there are things unknown, and in between are the doors of perception." What all the research and our experience show us is that our previous experiences, and are already established views, tend to shape what we see when we open those doors.

Wisdom is the ability to discern the good and evil in what we hear and see, but it is also the ability to discern the good and evil in the structures and conclusions that have been established in our own minds and that our minds automatically try to find in what we hear and see without even knowing we are doing it.

We all desperately need God's wisdom and we should pray the prayer of Solomon every day. "Give your servant, therefore, an understanding mind... able to discern between good and evil." An understanding mind to discern, not just the good and evil out there, but between the good, the half good, the straightforwardly mistaken, and the evil assumptions and preconceptions that we, and others, have built into our own minds. So that, when we open the doors of our perception, we are able to see not what we have conditioned ourselves, or been conditioned to see, but what is truly there. Exegesis and not Eisegesis

- the meaning of the words that are actually spoken and not the meaning we expect and want or are being persuaded to find.

In this morning's Gospel, we find Jesus talking in graphic terms about how we can only have a life if we eat his flesh and drink his blood. These words are hard for us because they refer to the common culture and mindset of Jesus's day, which included temple sacrifice. We have no such mindset and so we may find such language hard to relate to and understand. His words are perhaps like an inkblot which our minds just can't see anything in at all, whereas the people listening to Jesus would have seen instantly the shapes he is referring to and understood their meaning.

And yet, as we receive Eucharist each week, as we receive Christ into our hearts and minds and souls, we understand how he is the living bread that can indeed bring life to our needy and battered souls. He opens those narrow chinks of the caverns of our perception that Blake refers to, and enables us to perceive the infinite grace and love of God. Christ gives us the wisdom to discern this by taking the bread and wine at the Last Supper and saying, "This is my body... This is my blood..."

Wisdom is not just knowledge. It is not just the ability to analyze information accurately. Wisdom is found in a person whose mind and heart and soul are infused with a spiritual awareness and who looks to God for understanding. That's why the writer of Proverbs 9:10 says, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding."

All of us have opinions, experiences, and attitudes that influence how we look at the world. It cannot be otherwise. We also see what everyone sees. What is there? The wise person is the one who seeks the third perspective of God to measure and discern what is in themselves as well as what they and everyone else can see. That is the spirit we call Holy, the spirit that opens our eyes to the truth. The Spirit gives us pause when we hear people ~ including ourselves ~ jumping to prejudiced conclusions when they are proclaiming eisegesis and not exegesis. And it is also the Spirit that makes us, if we ever see the equivalent of our loved one in the arms of another through the living room window, hold back on the cement!



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