

Let us begin with 2 questions: 'How do you see yourself?' , and 'What is most important to you ?'

Take a moment to put it even more personally:

'How do I see myself?' 'What is most important to me ?'

The Scottish poet, Robbie Burns, pointed out how difficult it is to see ourselves as others see us. I'm sorry I can't do a Scottish accent, but his words are "O would some power the gift give us to see ourselves as others see us." In our first reading, we see Solomon facing this problem, and amazingly, in spite of being the King of a now firmly established kingdom, King David's son and King of God's chosen people, "a great people too numerous to count or number", as Solomon himself puts it – in spite of all this, Solomon calls himself "only a little child who does not know how to carry out his duties."

Such humility, especially from a Middle Eastern ruler, is astounding ! As Solomon points out in his own book of Proverbs, "Haughty eyes and a proud heart....are sin", but it is amazing to see his humility. And Solomon's humility endears him to God, who time and time again has found the Israelites to be a 'proud and stiff-necked people'. Yet this humble response shows how Solomon sees himself when God appears to him in a dream at the crucial beginnings of his kingship, to ask the generous questions, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you."

God's question would have reassured the new, young king, who was NOT first in line to the throne, that his reign was chosen by God and not just by David. When God asks us questions, it can strengthen our faith.

If God asked us this question, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you", what answer would you give ? What answers would world leaders give today, I wonder, especially in the Middle East ? It's the question some people ask themselves, "What would I do if I won the lottery ?".

Solomon could actually have justified a request for material riches. Middle Eastern archaeology (and my sister is a Middle Eastern archaeologist) shows that monarchs spent enormous sums of money to maintain their authority and thus bring peace for their people. They built great palaces and monuments at sacred sites. Indeed, Solomon, as we know built his palace and the Temple. Yet he chose to ask not for riches, but for wisdom.

Solomon was certainly not wise at the beginning of his reign, nor even particularly God-honouring. He married Pharaoh's daughter and marriage to an unbeliever and foreigner was expressly forbidden in God's commandments laid down in Deuteronomy. Royal alliances of this sort were a way to consolidate power, but Solomon has yet to learn that it is God, not Pharaoh, who has the power to guarantee the future of Solomon's kingdom.

Solomon went on to have 700 wives and 200 concubines – not a wise move, I would have thought, in anybody's book. Think of all the arguments about priority, for a start ! Furthermore, he was involved in political intrigue and even the murder of several opponents. He offered sacrifices on the pagan high places, before the Temple was built. So Solomon very much needs what he prays for, "Give your servant a discerning heart."

What an amazingly open-ended offer God has given to Solomon. God is the same then as now. Jesus gives a similar invitation to his disciples and to us, “Ask and it will be given to you. Seek and you will find. Knock and it will be opened for you.”

The Hebrew translation is actually “Ask what I shall give you.” It is not that God will give Solomon whatever he wants, but that Solomon should understand what he needs from God. We need to be in line with God to know what we want.

So, how do we learn from Solomon, who was, after all, far from perfect ?

Here in chapter 3, at the beginning of his reign, in his response to God, first he recalls God’s love and generosity: God’s love for his father King David, and God’s generosity in allowing Solomon to sit on the throne. He remembers to give thanks.

Then, Solomon has genuine humility. He admits he doesn’t have the wisdom for his new position. His humility is fitting. He is, after all, following in the footsteps of Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Samuel and David. So Solomon asks for a listening heart – and probably doesn’t understand the depth of what he is asking of God – as we often don’t.

Solomon doesn’t specify whether he expects to listen to God or to his people, but God knows that he needs to do both, in that order.

Wisdom, in the Bible, is practical more than philosophical. Today’s old testament reading of chapter 3 in 1 Kings sets this wisdom firmly in a practical context – with the wisdom God will give him, Solomon’s politics, his leadership of God’s people (not merely Solomon’s people), will be practical and will result in peace for the nation.

Solomon’s request for an “understanding heart” is, although he does not realise the depth of it, a request to be wholly and completely obedient to the will of God, so that, in his case, he could govern people wisely and well.

We see a beautiful example of this almost immediately (and do read this wonderful episode for yourself). When two women both claim that a baby is theirs and that the other baby which died in the night is not, how does Solomon find out the true mother ? If we know the solution, it seems obvious, but I think very few of us would work out what to do (and there was no DNA testing in those days). Solomon ordered the living baby to be cut in two and share between the two claimants, so of course the real mother shrieks out that she would rather give the living baby to the other woman, and thus reveals herself by her love. Simple, yet profound. Solomon has wisdom that comes from God.

It is the same for us. It is not wisdom that is acquired through innate ability or experience. It comes from knowing God and wanting to align ourselves with his love for others. And it can be lost if we drift away from God. As it says in Proverbs, “The fear (honouring) of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” (Proverbs 9, verse 10)