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When a salesperson approaches you on a shop floor and asks you "What can I do for you?" they expect a certain form of answer depending on the type of store you are in. They would be really shocked if in answer to their question "What can I do for you?" you answered, "Well, you can give me \$20,000", or "You can give me a lift home: I came into town on the bus and it has started raining." In other words the question "What can I do for you?" is not really open-ended. Not like those jokes about genies in bottles. There are lots of jokes around the theme of people finding a bottle containing a genie who offers them a certain number of open-ended wishes. And all such jokes play on the human fondness for having wishes come true, as do a number of fairy tales. It would be very nice if our wishes would turn easily into reality.

The passage from 1 Kings about this dream of Solomon could be seen in that light: as God being like a genie who is in the business of granting wishes. The passage was probably written when the Jewish people were in exile, a good many generations after the reigns of both David and Solomon. One of the questions the text seems to be answering for those in exile pondering the fate of the kingdom that once was is this: "Why was the reign of Solomon so successful?" And you only need to read the story of Solomon's time on the throne as recorded in either Kings or Chronicles and you see a picture of great prosperity and international renown for Israel. Even the Queen of Sheba makes a trip to Jerusalem to see for herself the splendour of Israel's wealth and prestige.

Certainly Solomon was not without his faults, which are not overlooked in the narrative recording his reign. While it was commonly agreed that the marriages brought political alliances, Solomon would appear to have had many of the human failings of his father David at that point. The list of his foreign wives and concubines is astronomical. And as the author of Kings points out, Israel had been warned about entering into marriage with people of a different race for fear that their hearts would be turned away from Jahweh to follow other gods. Let me read you a couple of verses from chapter 11 which give a different story to the wisdom of Solomon from what we have in our passage.

(read 1 Kings 11:1, 9-11)

So the picture our author is giving overall is mixed and needs to be balanced as we read this passage this morning. However, the dream encounter with God in today's reading is designed to give the answer to Solomon's successful reign as the king of God's chosen people. It speaks of God addressing Solomon in this dream with the question "Ask what I should give you." Or, put another way: "What can I do for you?" This open ended question brings a recitation by Solomon of what God has already given him through his father David and concludes with an acknowledgment of his inexperience ("I am only a child," verse 7). Then eventually Solomon arrives at an answer to the question: "Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people." As far as the author of Kings is concerned this is the key to all the other blessings that Solomon enjoyed: his intention to place importance on ruling God's people wisely and well as his first priority.

You see, there was no party politics in those days. Party politics has relegated wisdom to a very minor role in decision-making in democracies. In the times when kings ruled it was the quality of the personality of the king which determined the fate of the people. And when you had a king like Solomon whose primary concern was to rule with wisdom and thoughtfulness you had a nation which had a lot going for it. The quality of parliamentarians has become of little moment in our society: no matter what an individual politicians may think is the right thing to do, they are caught up in a process which subsumes ethical standards under party policy.

I wonder if any of you saw the two Labour politicians who voted against the legislation which reintroduced offshore processing of asylum seekers. Both of them women I noticed. They never stood a snowflakes chance in hell of winning the debate with both Labour and the Coalition lining up to bring back that dreadfully soul-destroying legislation which can have people languishing on islands off our shores for years while they wait for some action on their claim for asylum. And you

can be very sure that the party machine would not have allowed them to register their dissent had their vote been required in a close ballot.

I read with interest of the recent resignation of one of the more moderate politicians in the House of Representatives in America. In resigning this Republican representative from Ohio, Steve LaTourett, announced he would not seek re-election with these words: "The time has come for not only good politics but good policy. I have reached the conclusion that the atmosphere today, and the reality that exists in the House of Representatives, no longer encourages the finding of common ground." The article went on to speak about how there is a growing division not just in the houses of parliament but in the community between people of different political persuasions. A news report said neighborhoods were dividing themselves by political parties. It said that you could map out not only Democrat and Republican states, but communities within states where people could live with neighbors who shared their political world view and where those of a different persuasion were discouraged.

I suspect that the story of Solomon tells us that wisdom does not mix well with power. No matter how high-minded Solomon may have been in this dialogue in the dream, and no matter how elevated the sentiment behind asking that he might seek an understanding mind to rule his people, he actually became something of a tyrant in the way he treated his people. In particular, the way he simply conscripted people by force to provide the labour to build the massive temple.

It really is fraught isn't it, the tension between building and maintaining what we know as God's house and the actual needs of ordinary people? A good few of us will have visited some of the massive cathedrals of England and Europe: they are wonderful buildings which can inspire a sense of awe when you enter them. But they were built with people in the surrounding districts living in poverty and hardship. And you may recall that there are hints in previous readings we have had from the book of Samuel that there is some suggestion that the building of a temple to God was not God's idea but a human one. You may remember that after David had settled his claims to the throne and was nicely ensconced in his palace he has this flash of conscience: "Here I am living in splendour and God is living in that canvas tabernacle dragged across the wilderness." When he shares his ideas with Nathan the prophet, God's word from Nathan is virtually a question: "Who says I need a house to live in?"

The danger with wisdom being seen as derived from one human being is that individually we are not good vessels for sustaining it. Throw in the power that is invested in a king and the issue becomes even more problematic. If you think of certain ecclesiastical traditions you see that a whole lot of expectation for direction and right thinking is endowed in one person. And that is seen at both ends of the ecclesiastical spectrum from the high church end with priests, bishops, cardinals etc, down to the other end where people of special charismatic capacities are given a very high profile in being the source of God's wisdom.

It seems to me that we need all the wisdom resident in us as the body of Christ to know the mind of God. I learned something fascinating at the Ministers' Retreat I attended earlier in the week. There was a person there who was a minister in South Australia when the Uniting Church there completely restructured its way of operating. What they have done is declared the whole Synod one presbytery – that is, made the Synod and the Presbytery essentially the same body. They have then set up this series of networks for the more regional activities of the church. What was of interest though was that congregations were free to choose which other congregations they would relate to in a network. In other words, the networks were not related to geography but to having a common theological position. She went on to say that the only reason that the South Australian church did that was to avoid having a split over sexuality. Some of those networks now have theological documents expressing their particular theological stance which any minister coming into that network must sign. In fact, some ministers who were in congregations which chose a particular network to belong to and who could not sign the document were asked to leave.

I say this not just to register the fact that the divisions that we see in politics are not far away in the church, but to ask a question about where we think wisdom lies. Do any of us really think that the wisdom of God is likely to lie solely within our thinking and understanding? Is it not more likely

that the wisdom of God is much bigger than the schemas that human beings with their penchant for over-simplification conjure up?

Let me just touch on the other two readings which make a comment about wisdom. First the Psalm. The last verse of our Psalm reading said: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding." In part the psalm is basing this call to wisdom by exploring the amazing creation in which we live and extolling the greatness of the one whose being lies behind it.

You may get sick of me quoting from things which give new insight into this creation in which we live. I don't do that just because I love learning this stuff and find myself just constantly gob-smacked at the things scientists and astronomers are discovering. It is because exploring the wonders of our universe puts us in our place: we are meant to be awestruck. And awe is as good a word to translate the Hebrew word for fear. We have a negative connotation to fear. You could just as easily translate that line in the Psalm: "The awe of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." One of my first awestruck moments as a teenager was lying back on the lawn of the White Hills Police Station yard one summer's night with my mate John Olsen. We were imagining we were able to travel to the edge of the universe, the very edge. And then we were confronted by the question: And what is outside the edge of the universe? That question created a sense of awe within me: What a God!

Take time, dear people, to ponder the nature of this marvelous reality in which we live. Spending time in the back yard with my little grandson the other day made me check myself and how I see the world. I had things to do like weeding and mulching etc. Meanwhile, Reuben took time to look closely at the grass, and would find an insect and spend time observing it and taking a keen interest in what it did, what it looked like. And when a bird called he would stop and listen. We can learn from the children what awe is.

Let me join the first and the last verse of our epistle reading together to make one more comment about wisdom. When read together they flow thus: "Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise making the most of the time... giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Have you ever felt that you live too much either in the future or in the past? It is a great temptation you know, especially when you have something like retirement coming closer. The sad thing about living in the future, or in the past, is that you rob the moment of its moment. Jesus said "Take no thought for the morrow.." This passage says "making the most of the time". I suspect they are saying much the same thing. God does not live in the past or in the future: God is the God of the now: it is in the now that we find the presence. Living in the present will in turn give us cause to give the author of our lives the thanks and the reverence and the love which all human life is designed to give.