

Sermon, 11 May 2025, Church of Scotland Geneva

Text 1: Jeremiah 10: 1-13 (taken from New International Version):

¹ Hear what the LORD says to you, people of Israel. ² This is what the LORD says:

"Do not learn the ways of the nations
or be terrified by signs in the heavens,
though the nations are terrified by them.

³ For the practices of the peoples are worthless;
they cut a tree out of the forest,
and a craftsman shapes it with his chisel.

⁴ They adorn it with silver and gold;
they fasten it with hammer and nails
so it will not totter.

⁵ Like a scarecrow in a cucumber field,
their idols cannot speak;
they must be carried
because they cannot walk.

Do not fear them;
they can do no harm
nor can they do any good."

⁶ No one is like you, LORD;
you are great,
and your name is mighty in power.

⁷ Who should not fear you,
King of the nations?
This is your due.

Among all the wise leaders of the nations
and in all their kingdoms,
there is no one like you.

⁸ They are all senseless and foolish;
they are taught by worthless wooden idols.

⁹ Hammered silver is brought from Tarshish
and gold from Uphaz.

What the craftsman and goldsmith have made
is then dressed in blue and purple—
all made by skilled workers.

¹⁰ But the LORD is the true God;
he is the living God, the eternal King.

When he is angry, the earth trembles;
the nations cannot endure his wrath.

¹¹ "Tell them this: 'These gods, who did not make the heavens and the earth, will perish from the earth and from under the heavens.'"

¹² But God made the earth by his power;
he founded the world by his wisdom
and stretched out the heavens by his understanding.

¹³ When he thunders, the waters in the heavens roar;
he makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth.
He sends lightning with the rain
and brings out the wind from his storehouses.

Text 2: St John 4: 21-26, 39-42

²¹ "Woman," Jesus replied, "believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. ²⁴ God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth."

²⁵ The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us."

²⁶ Then Jesus declared, "I, the one speaking to you—I am he."

³⁹ Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did." ⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. ⁴¹ And because of his words many more became believers.

⁴² They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world."

A lot of value is given to wisdom in the Bible. It played a particularly important role in Jewish culture. Joseph effectively saved Egypt and, by extension, a great deal of the Middle East from famine by virtue of his God-given wisdom. Samuel was mentored into a hero of the Jewish people by the wise priest, Eli. Wisdom is set on a pedestal almost second only to God Himself in the Book of Proverbs. And these are just a few examples.

The New Testament continues this. Jesus was widely recognized for His miracles, His healing and His wise teaching. Wisdom is largely appropriated into a Christian virtue throughout the Epistles.

Nor does it stop there. All major religions show considerable respect for wisdom, it is attributed to God in almost every context and even those without any, particular faith will praise the wise actions of a politician, a businessman or woman, a general or an academic, who is judged to have taken them.

But what exactly is wisdom ? Although rarely, if ever, considered characteristic of those deemed stupid, it is hardly the same thing as intelligence or other abilities. Pure idiots may find it hard to rise to high office, but there are enough politicians whose actions are considered far from wise, whether across history or in today's news. Making money needs a degree of acumen, yet some of the world's richest people seem intent on inflicting cruelty and suffering on others in a way which appears rather unwisely short-sighted at best. Being intelligent does not de facto make you wise. So what does ?

In the passage we read from Jeremiah, the prophet is attacking the practice of people who have taken to idolatry to find new solutions. He acknowledges that the idols they create are quite ingenious works of

skill. Speaking of an idol, he notes how, “They adorn it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so it will not totter.” At the same time, such idols are useless. “Do not fear them,” Jeremiah says, “they can do harm nor can they do any good.”

Jeremiah faced the somewhat unenviable task of trying to convince the people of Judah, specifically those in Jerusalem, to stop courting disaster through their idolatry and the sins which it both represented and led to. The time was around the turn of the seventh to sixth centuries BC and Judah faced imminent destruction by the kingdom of Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylon. Trusting in God was treated like a back-up option. The assumption was that He would protect His people regardless of what they did. When they lost confidence in that, they turned from listening to Him and looked for new options, even going so far as to create idols like their enemies were doing and even to indulge in revolting practices such as human sacrifice.

All of this was anathema to Jeremiah. He preaches that, “God made the earth by His power; He founded the world by His wisdom and stretched out the heavens by His understanding.” He describes the leaders of his time, “Among all the wise leaders of the nations and in all their kingdoms, there is no one like [God]. They are all senseless and foolish; they are taught by worthless wooden idols.”

The question remains, however, what made these people so unwise ? These were statesmen and military leaders. They were often quite unsavoury characters for sure, indulging in political intrigue and backstabbing which would make the characters in a Shakespearean drama blush. Nonetheless, they were not mere fools.

Nor did they want to be rid of God, at least not superficially. They saw a place for faith, even when this was completely mis-placed in false idols. Believing in something remained important. So why would they reject God, Who had created everything around them ?

Perhaps that was the problem. God had created everything around them. He controlled it. Their response was to start creating things themselves, things which could, in their minds, play the role of God. They wanted idols to worship and from which they could, they imagined, learn. They deliberately constrained their vision to what they knew.

This was not wise. They achieved nothing by pretending that the world around them was not there. The Babylonians were certainly there but admitting that they needed to employ their faith in God in a way which they could not fully control was too much. This is what wisdom is – knowing what we can control, understand and do, and knowing what we cannot control, understand or do. It is about mixing our faith and our intelligence, or other abilities, to achieve a truly valuable outcome. God calls us to action. We need to be wise enough to respond.

Jesus often reached beyond the accepted norms of religious wisdom and convention, so much so that He ended up dying for it. It takes courage to be wise because it means looking beyond convention, and the accepted wisdom is that that is not an intelligent thing to do.

Such was the case when He spoke with the Samaritan woman in today's reading from John's Gospel. Jesus tells her outright that the Samaritans, a people held in contempt by religious Jews, worship what they do not know while the Jews lay claim to knowing full well what God means. However, he then tells her, "Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in

truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.”

The woman testifies to her people, the Samaritans, that Jesus is sharing insight and wisdom such as she would expect from the Christ. As a result, many believe and come to Jesus to learn more.

There was no question of simple intelligence here. While it is unlikely that the Jews and the Samaritans particularly rated each others’ intellect, their mutual distrust and loathing was based on religious and ethnic differences. The Samaritans were considered unclean and were not included in the kosher, Jewish life.

However, this is where we see the failure to exercise real wisdom which was the case in Jeremiah’s time as well. The established religion, which the Jews claimed to understand while the Samaritans apparently did not, was subject to defined parameters. You were in or you were out. You followed the rules to be acceptable or you didn’t. You understood the law or you didn’t. These were all human constructs. They were derived from God’s teaching but had somehow become quite exclusive. In reaching out to the Samaritans, Jesus showed that there was a wider existence out there. He engaged them with wisdom. He encouraged the woman to consider her faith and to look beyond the limited context she knew to one where that faith would mean a lot more. Being wise was not about understanding theological concepts or advanced theories. It was about taking a faith in a God Who cared and Who would act, and looking for how that could be used to achieve something.

So are we wise ? How broadly do we look ? It is not simply about avoiding discrimination. We all know how abhorrent that is. Being wise, though, is about seeking where our faith can work, where it can be applied and

where it can make a difference. It is about not restricting it only to the areas where we are comfortable. We become wise when we are prepared to learn in faith and to use that learning.

It was only a year or two ago when a Rabbi and a Roman Catholic priest addressed the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. If our forebears had accepted that God's grace might apply across many others besides Presbyterians, how much suffering and fighting might have been avoided ?

The debate about online Services may still be ongoing but until the necessity arose from COVID-19, how many of us would have imagined that the Wednesday lunchtime Services on Zoom would draw that many more people to the community of our Church ? That was something worth learning.

There's a lot of wisdom in the less frequently read books of the Bible but how often do we consider seeing what Ezra, Habakkuk or Revelation have to tell us ?

And when the world seems intent on punishing anyone who disagrees with it, when it is considered unwise to serve anyone's but your own interests and when seeking someone else to blame seems the default solution for every problem, is it wise to take a stance where other people actually matter ? Yet consider this: history is not kind to those who have destroyed and taken no interest in learning about their place in the world beyond what they considered to matter. It was not considered wise to challenge the likes of the Emperor Nero, King John of England or Josef Stalin but they are hardly remembered as being among the wisest rulers.

It takes wisdom to know what you believe and to look for where it can make a difference. Yet that is what Christ Himself did, and His wisdom is beyond all doubt.