1 Kings 3:4-28

King Solomon was a product of the scandalous liaison between King David and Uriah's wife Bathsheba. It is a succession marked by court intrigue and competition between rival factions. The troubles or curse that beset David's house following the taking of Bathsheba and murder of Uriah follow him to his deathbed. With David's oldest sons dead, next in line is Adonijah, his fourth son. His first son with Bathsheba died as an infant. David had Absolom killed when he attempted to usurp the throne. With a coup, led in part by the prophet Nathan, and with Bathsheba's help, they convinced David, who was dying to declare Solomon, Bathsheba's second son, king.

After all the intrigue, Solomon ascends the throne of his father. Finally he is king. And he goes to Gibeon to offer sacrifices to the Lord. After stating his love of the Lord, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places which were originally Canaanite sanctuaries, now used by Israelites to worship their God. The worship of Baal and other Canaanite deities was never totally forgotten. So a dark cloud already hangs over Solomon's actions.

Gibeon was recognized as the chief sanctuary in Israel - the temple had not yet been built in Jerusalem. Solomon's sacrificial rites at Gibeon were lavish. While he was there, the Lord appeared to him in a dream. Appearances of a deity at a sanctuary and in dreams or nightly visions were not uncommon throughout the ancient near east. In his dream,

Solomon is given a choice of anything he wants from God. “Ask me, what would you like me to give you?”

The divine question is particularly meaningful when considering the circumstances regarding the royal succession from his father David. Solomon was not the heir apparent to the throne, a throne that he ascended by intrigue and manipulation. God’s question presents an opportunity that would soothe, comfort and assure a young king. God offers to give anything to Solomon to help secure his reign with an honest, “What do you want?”

Solomon could request: long life, riches, power, revenge, and victory in battle. While it may seem that God is offering Solomon a blank cheque, it seems to be more of a test of Solomon’s fitness for kingship. Will Solomon answer rightly? Solomon starts by praising God for God’s faithfulness to his father David, and he describes his own situation. He is a young man. Calling himself a “little child” is simply a way of expressing humility. He has to govern a very numerous people; and not just any people, but a nation of God’s own choosing. So he asks God for a “listening heart” - or - “understanding mind,” in order to judge God’s people and “to discern between good and evil.”

A listening heart, and understanding mind, the ability to discern what is right and good - these are qualities essential to good governance, qualities we should try to find in all our leaders. It speaks well of the

young king that he recognizes the enormous responsibility he has, yet he does not seek material gifts for himself, but gifts of character that will benefit his people. If God's command is really a test, Solomon passes with flying colours; and we're assured of Solomon's divine fitness for office.

God is so pleased that Solomon has asked for discernment instead of riches, long life, or revenge, that God grants Solomon's request with some bonuses to help him along the way. God is pleased with Solomon's request and commends the young king. Solomon's request is met, with the additional promise of "riches and honour." It is important to note that these material blessings are secondary. He speaks of himself as God's servant and seeks not his own personal gain, but the good of his people – *their* – best life.

This promise needs to be carefully understood. How are we to theologically consider the role of "riches and honour" granted to Solomon from God, presumably as a blessing in response to Solomon's good faith? This is where modern interpretations fail us. In ancient Israel, riches are a sign of divine blessing, but material riches look very different during the age of Solomon.

In our current monetary society, riches are often equated with individuals with assets many times more than the average household income. A monetary society stockpiles and hoards such riches, often accumulating

them through unethical or minimally non-generous means. In a monetary society, riches are not always a blessing. In examining a theology of riches, the words of Jesus, from the context of a more monetary Greco-Roman world, may better reflect or make sense in our present day.

But, Solomon ruled an agrarian kingdom. Coinage had not yet been invented and most scholars suggest that trade was based on duty, obligation through reciprocity. Riches for Solomon's kingdom meant abundant harvest, protection from pestilence, and adequate rainfall. All of these factors to production are impossible to stockpile. The agrarian life forced year after year dependence on God. It is precisely this dependence on God that Solomon shows in his response. And God answers.

Solomon has chosen a different style of kingship. He knows that a listening heart and an understanding mind are more valuable than traditional signs of kingship. The concept of "understanding" is not mere cognition, but integration with morality as seen with the clarification "able to discern between good and evil."

Rejecting the pursuit of power, he chose instead to govern with the spirit of a servant. This story remembers Solomon as a humble man who realized that he was not adequate for the task of leadership. Yet, the authority was not Solomon, but God. God also offers him long life, but this time with conditions, "If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statues

and my commandments."

After his encounter with God in his dream, Solomon moves to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices there in front of the Ark of the Covenant instead of staying at Gibeon. His worship at Jerusalem gives evidence that his gift of discernment has begun to take hold even if some of his late worship practices will invite reproach.

Having established Solomon's private piety, the story now turns to his public persona. In spite of everything, Solomon was famous for his great wisdom. His judgments in court were also praised to the skies, the most famous of them involving a couple of prostitutes. The account of the dispute between the two prostitutes is offered as further evidence that God has blessed the king with wisdom. At the conclusion of the story, we learn that:

> *"When all Israel heard about the judicial decision which the king had rendered, they respected the king, for they realized that he possessed supernatural wisdom to make judicial decisions."*

For children, and even some adults, this story is both horrifying and mesmerizing. How could two women argue over an infant? How could the great king be so seemingly cavalier about this infant's life? What would you have done had you been one of the mother's? The monarch? Today we see the justice issues more clearly. We notice that the women, marginalised at best, have no names.

With knowledge of the way power does and does not work in the world, our impression of King Solomon is much more nuanced and complex. Did he give pause to what might happen in response to this infant's life hanging in the balance? And just what sort of future did this child have? What about the rest of the story?

The same power dynamic that showcases Solomon's accessibility also allows a spectacle to be made of the two women. Yes, the story presents a clever riddle, but it is also a heartbreaking tale of cruelty, loss, and grief. Is Solomon as macabre as he is wise? Will the true mother reveal herself before Solomon slices apart the infant?

The power Solomon holds at this moment is breathtaking. In many paintings of this story, guards dangle the baby upside-down, clutching the infant's ankle in one hand and a sword in the other. The detail reinforces the vulnerability of the people under Solomon's charge. Babies, prostitutes, widows, orphans: society's most defenceless members live and die at the will or whim of the king.

The story, with the two women and two babies, jerks on every human emotion we have. Children, grieving, death, frustration, fear, doubt, longing for justice, craving order ... this story has it all. Thus the swift and irreversible judgment of the king is what the people crave.

Nevertheless, we are drawn into question about the scenario itself. Is the accusing woman reliable? How does she know the infant's cause of death, if, by her own admission, she was asleep when it happened? There are also some troubling assumptions about the grieving mother. In the depth of her grief, she appears to be indifferent to the death of another baby, even after she went to the trouble of trying to make the second infant her own.

Is Solomon's decision really all that wise? What would he have done if the woman hadn't cried out – actually divided the remaining "property?" Solomon's future seems bright, at least in this story, as God grants him favour, because Solomon has all the right words in all the right places. However, is that true wisdom? Is that **applied** wisdom? Do Solomon's later decisions reflect on his desire for God's will and the flourishing of the Israelites, the nation God chose?

For the narrator, this story is not really about the women or their babies. It is all about Solomon. There seems to be an ironic reading to this story, since people would later have known he wasn't wise in practice. Solomon's takeover of the throne was violent and manipulative. His enslavement of the Israelites to build a temple, his marrying Pharaoh's daughter, to form an alliance with Egypt, plus six hundred and ninety-nine more wives do not seem to be particularly wise moves. And just in case all the wives happened to be busy at the same time some evening, he had three hundred concubines who were ready to drop everything for

him at a moment's notice. Some of these were Moabites or Ammonites, some were Edomites or Sidonians, and there were five or six dozen Hittites thrown in to round things out. It was a regular smorgasbord that is rather difficult to envision as wisdom.

Furthermore, his taste for foreign ladies got him into all kinds of trouble. They worshipped a whole carnival of fancy foreign gods, and in his old age, Solomon decided to play it safe by seeing to it that not one of them went neglected. He put up expensive altars to Ashtoreth of the Sidonians, Milcom of the Ammonites, and Chemoth of the Moabites, to name just a few.

So all these later actions: prayers to foreign gods, building the temple after his own house, conscription of Israelites, foreign wives being allowed to persist in worship of foreign deities, do not seem like wisdom or valour, but fear. Solomon's choices and actions belie the impression here that he trusts God with his whole heart.

What are our own superstitions, our own failures of wisdom, our own quick justices that fail to fully rely on God's grace? What is the wisdom we should be seeking as the communion of saints and as members of the body of Christ? What is Solomon's legacy to us – what does the story of Solomon tell us?

Solomon's story is the story of humanity beginning with creation, with

Adam and Eve. It is the story of God continually fixing, continually re-forming God's relationship with his creation. God's partner creatures lived in friendship with God, with each other, and with all creation. God smiled.

God's joy was disrupted when the earth creatures decided they could find joy in ways other than living as partners with God. Humans decided to find joy by becoming gods. Eventually conflicts and wars broke out. God groaned. The harmony of the universe was disrupted. God thought of destroying his creation with a flood. After destroying most of the earth, God made a promise to Noah to never destroy the earth again.

How do we interpret this story for today? First and foremost, we are reminded of God's interaction and that God is God and we are not. It is God who chooses, equips, and is with us as we serve and lead. God also asks us to respond to the same sort of question asked of Solomon. What do we want. What will we desire for the Creator of the Universe to give to us? What shall our answer be?

Secondly, we can rest assured that God works through a variety of people, all of whom are flawed and imperfect. Even the real wise guys don't do everything perfectly. **Yet still God raises the right people at the right time to do what is right in God's sight.** There is great hope and possibility in this knowledge and much that we can learn from Solomon's example.

Finally, there is always a need for discernment and justice. Would you rather stand before Solomon or Jesus for judgement and justice? Jesus is not only right and just, but he also metes out compassion and mercy. Justice as displayed by Solomon is without mercy. It is cold in its threat to the life of the infant to get to the truth. Leadership - in the church - in the community - in the family - demands careful listening, practised discernment, justice, compassion and mercy. Leaders can walk confidently in their God-given authority.

God will provide us the tools and wisdom to lead if we will follow God faithfully and trust God. And may God's will always be done.

Amen.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Generous God, you gave your servant Solomon wisdom so that he might govern your people well. Grant us your wisdom, so that we might perform our life's duties with gratitude and wisdom. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. **Amen.**