

Theme: The wisdom of Solomon

Today I am going to talk about Solomon becoming king over the United Kingdom of Israel, replacing his father David who we are told slept with his ancestors, meaning he had died and was buried in the city of David present day Jerusalem. Now David reigned for 40 years, 7 years in Hebron and 37 years in Jerusalem.

Before Solomon became king, he was in a similar situation to our present queen in that had our queen's uncle not abdicated, and had he had children, the whole royal family would be totally different today. In the case of Solomon, Adonijah David's eldest son, he would normally be the next king, and he had declared himself king even before David had died, and it was only at the intervention of Solomon's mother Bathsheba and the prophet Nathan that David denounced Adonijah as the next king, and announced Solomon as his chosen heir.

Out of all the brothers and sisters David had chosen Solomon to be the next king, and the process of him becoming king had not been a smooth one and his problems did not end after his coronation. His brother Adonijah, still very resentful of losing the right to be king, still opposed him, and after David died, he conspired to have Solomon removed and to place himself on the throne. Now when Solomon found out about the conspiracy, he had Adonijah put to death along with his fellow conspirators, although he spared one of the conspirators who had been a loyal servant to David, but he banned him from court as punishment. Solomon's accession to the throne was at times in doubt and often violent. However, by the start of our reading we are told in chapter 2 verse 12 that Solomon sat on the throne of his father David, and his kingdom was firmly established.

Our reading now jumps to Chapter 3:3 where we read, "Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David; love in this context has to do more with obedience and loyalty, they did not love God as a Father, loving God as our Father is a Christian concept introduced by Jesus. Although we are assured by the writer, of Solomon's obedience to the statutes of his father David, the author then writes the word 'only', indicating a caveat to that assurance. Because the writer adds, "Only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places." The inference here is a lack of judgement because pagans worshipped at high places, but we must remember that the temple at Jerusalem had not yet been built. Also in verse 1, just before our reading, Solomon married a daughter of the king of Egypt, a Gentile, which was strictly against God's command, Deuteronomy chapter 7, where God says, "Do not intermarry". So, although right at the beginning of his reign we are told that he showed signs of keeping the statutes of his father David, nevertheless there were also ominous signs of disobedience.

In verse 4 we are told that the high place where Solomon went to sacrifice was Gibeon, about 8 miles north of Jerusalem, which was then the most sacred high place in Israel, and we are told that he used to sacrifice up to a thousand animals at a time there. I want to pause there for just a moment, because I want to try and describe what it would have been like to sacrifice a thousand animals, and it is significance to the Israelites and to us. The altar would not be like our altar, it would be very much larger and probably much lower, it would be

made of a large number of stones, and in this case would be outside, because a huge fire would be burning on top of it, just like a very large barbecue. The animal offerings would probably have been oxen or sheep and in this case, there would be a thousand of them, that's a large number of animals in the cooking and burning process. A thousand animals would have taken many people to cook, all of whom would be priests, descendants of Aaron, Moses' brother, and the cooking would possibly have taken several days or weeks, and the feasting would also last for many weeks as well.

We are told in Leviticus 1:13 that the smoke from the burning animals would be pleasing to God and it was the portion of the burnt meat that was God's portion. And it was in the burning of God's portion that was believed to transform the meat from the ordinary into the sacred or holy. Which is what we do at our Eucharist service when a priest consecrates bread and wine to the Lord and which for us then becomes sacred or holy, which is why the more common name for our service is Holy Communion. Also, in our Book of Common Prayer the post communion prayer reads, "Mercifully to accept this our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving", and in this service we say, "Through him we offer you our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice." In both the Israelite sacrifices and in the Christian ceremony of Holy Communion the meal becomes a sacrificial fellowship meal with God.

Moving on to verse 5, it was while he was at Gibeon that the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream. Dreams are not unusual, God spoke to Joseph in a dream and told him to go to Egypt with his family to escape from Herod. Quite often, if we have a problem, it is nearly always better to sleep on it, and then by morning miraculously the problem has been solved, or at least the solution has become apparent; for a Christian this is, I believe, the work of the Holy Spirit.

So, following Solomon's dream in which God said to Solomon, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you." we have the start of Solomon's prayer. What an opportunity Solomon had, because this was a blank cheque waiting for him to fill in, but it was also a two-edged sword because what he asked for would reveal his true character.

So, from verse 6 to 14 we get Solomon's beautiful prayer where Solomon opens his heart to God, and it is in verse 7 that we read, "And now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David". Solomon, by calling himself a servant was acknowledging that although God had made him king, he was still the servant of God. At the end of verse 7 Solomon confesses that, "I am only a small child," indeed Solomon may have only been 20 years old when he became king, with little experience of life let alone as a king, and in verse 8 Solomon notes that the people he is to rule over are God's specially chosen people who are too numerous to number.

We then come to verse 9 which transforms Solomon from an ordinary man to a king. Now I can understand why, instead of asking for personal things Solomon says, "Give your servant an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil; for who is able to govern this your great people?" It was because of the huge task in front of him as king over God's own people, and the realization that he could not do it without God's help.

We often hear of Solomon's wisdom, but seldom do we hear of his humility, but here is not only true wisdom but also true humility in acknowledging that he needs God's help if he is to succeed in the task that God has set him. When we get into a tough situation and pray for help, we too need humility, it is no good saying to God this is the problem, this is how I am going to solve it, now Lord God, please make it work. That is not how it's done, we must surrender all our own ideas and obey God in everything, and that may mean that instead of resorting to a grandiose scheme or a set of lies to get us out of trouble, we may merely be told to repent and ask for forgiveness.

Now Solomon asked for an understanding mind to govern God's people, and the ability to discern between good and evil, and Solomon's request should be a model for every one of us who wants to do God's will in their lives. We have all been given a job to do whether it is a menial job, or a job with great responsibility, and if you are lucky, your job will be a great joy to you as well, but whatever our jobs, let all of us pray to God in humility, for wisdom and discernment to do the job as best we can, and for the benefit of all those depending on us.

And because Solomon asked for wisdom to look after the people that God had placed into his care, God said to Solomon, "because you have asked for this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding, to do what is right I now do according to your word". "Indeed, I give you a wise and discerning mind. And because I'm pleased with you, I'm going to give you those things that you have not asked for, both riches and honour all your life, and if you keep my statutes as your father did, I will also give you a long life". Solomon's wisdom was a gift from God rather than something acquired through innate ability or experience, and that applies to us as well, we will never go wrong in asking God for wisdom.

Although Solomon may have started out reasonably well as king of Israel, sadly it didn't last, Solomon didn't manage to keep the statutes of his father David, and Solomon may well have died at an early age of 60 after 40 years as king, as God had warned him at the start of his reign.

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