**Sermon for the Annual Law Service in St Michan's Church Dublin**

Monday 3rd October 2022

1Kings 3: 4-15 and Romans 13:1-10

I am most grateful to the Archbishop of Dublin for his kind invitation to preach at this Annual Law Service marking the opening of the Law Term. It is a great privilege and honour to address you today as members of the legal profession, and others whose vocation and service contributes to the administration of the justice system of our land.

I’m also conscious that it’s a Monday morning and we all deserve a gentle start to the working week! Yet I wish to say something helpful to lift our minds from the pressing cases, the detailed briefs, the busy schedules of court, the weighty matters of judgement and instead to focus on some eternal values and principles.

Our Old Testament reading is from the Book of Kings, set in the early days of the reign of the Solomon, the newly crowned king of Israel sometime in the 10th century BC. The passage relates how the Lord appeared to the young man Solomon in a dream inviting him to ask what he would like to be given. He replied ‘*Give your servant an understanding mind to govern your people able to discern between good and evil’*

God then affirms his request and adds that ‘*because you have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or the life of your enemies but have asked for understanding, I give you a wise and discerning mind...’*

This morning I would like to suggest that our prayer to God for you in your legal work is for a wise and discerning mind. And further that our society might grow in wisdom and enable the young in their education and training to find the gift of wisdom.

In the Old Testament the people of Israel believed that God presided over the moral order and was the lord and judge of his people. The problem was that good and bad actions were not always seen to have their appropriate consequences. Hence developed the Law with reward and punishment and a system of justice to apply fairness and equity.

King Solomon was renowned for his wisdom and his application of that gift in judgement became legendary. We’re told that his wisdom surpassed the that of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. ‘*He composed 3000 proverbs and his songs numbered 1005, he could speak of trees, from the cedar in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows in the wall, he would speak of animals, birds, reptiles and fish. People came from all the nations to hear his wisdom.’*

It's poetic language describing the breadth and depth width of wisdom in God’s world.

The wisdom literature is an important genre in the OT – books such as Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job. They bring together the collected wisdom of generations of godly people and invite us to consider the complexity and simplicity of living wisely. Those authors of the wisdom books tell us that wisdom begins with a basic understanding of the fear of the Lord. This includes the recognition that God is behind the creation which was created with wisdom and order. The wise person will acknowledge God, learn to follow his commandments and discover his path for their lives.

*Quip*

*What's the difference between knowledge and wisdom?*

*Knowledge is knowing tomatoes are a fruit.*

*Wisdom is not putting tomatoes in a fruit salad.*

It’s not that long ago, certainly in the tradition that I come from that there would have been a text from Proverbs framed and hanging on the wall in many households.

*‘Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him and he will make you paths straight’.* Proverbs 3:5

It is a good maxim for life.

I have spent a good part of my working life in the world of education, and I often reflect on what governments now ask our schools to do. It seems to about imparting knowledge, skills, personal development, applying continual assessment, gaining qualifications. These are all laudable, justifiable and important goals but perhaps we may have forgotten that education at its core should be about training in wisdom, helping children and young people gain a shape to their living.

*There is an amusing story of a pupil in a woodwork class. The teacher asked him ‘What are you making Jimmy?’, “I’m making a portable sir’ he replied. “A portable what? said the teacher. “I don’t know yet sir, I’ve only just made the handle!’*

We smile but those child’s words have a nugget of truth in them for us. Surely the aim of all education is to teach a wisdom that is portable. Learning in such a way that we can carry what we have learnt into every situation of life, into new challenges, new relationships.

I’m sure you like me did have the joy of have some very good and wise teachers at various stages of our education. Wise teachers at home or at school or university see in young people their potential – what we can become. They open us up, inspire us, energise us, allow us to blossom and give us a sense that there is always more. They aim for excellence, and they are patient with the learner. They have a gentle delight in truth and goodness. As a result, pupils have their growing wisdom tested, developed and the desire to greater heights planted in hearts.

Wisdom above all guides the decisions we make in life. Many young people make good, well informed and wise decisions as they grow and learn to live well. However, others do not, often through no fault of their own, either they have had poor role models at home, bad life experiences or misguided friendships, unwise choices are made with terrible consequences and many end up committing offences, on the wrong side of the law and enter your world.

My first point is that whatever education is being asked to do it fundamentally should be about making people wise and to find a shape to their living.

We meet today in a Christian church, and I am a disciple of Jesus Christ, so I am bound to say wisdom begins with that fear of the Lord, to know and find meaning in life because you have found the centre and core of all reality – the one who brings peace to our restless souls. As people of faith, Christian parents and teachers yearn for our children to discover this most important truth, that they are loved by God. He has a desire to relate to us and to allow us to flourish and enjoy his love. This is the ultimate delight.

**The second point** I want to make about wisdom in life is that no matter how much we think about ourselves, no man is an island. We are created to live in community, in harmony with our fellows. Jesus told his disciples that they must turn the way the world thinks upside down. Pray for your enemies, do good to those who persecute you, love your neighbour as yourself, be generous with your mercy, forgive seventy times seven, do unto other as you would wish them to do unto you, go the extra mile.

Applying our hearts to the wisdom of our Saviour is difficult, teaching young and old these lessons and fulfilling them is challenging and costly. Jesus tells us that living for him is like taking up a cross and following him daily. His wisdom is not just for the head, it’s for the heart, hand, foot, mind and soul.

Wisdom should also make us life-long learners – *‘lean not upon your own understanding’*

We must never think that there is an age when we can stop learning. One is never too old to learn. *I like the story of the boy who had a friend in to play with him one day. His grannie lived with them in the same house and his grannie loved to read her bible every day. The wee lad’s friend saw the grannie sitting reading and he asked him what she was doing. He replied, ‘She’s swotting for her finals!”*

Being wise means must always be ready to learn specially to learn something about ourselves – and that takes great humility.

Modern societies are very adept at hoovering God from public sight, assigning him to a dim past and un-enlightened age. As a clerical friend of mine remarked recently *‘in society today, the horizon of heaven seems to have vanished out of sight’*. However, as people of faith we believe that the spiritual world is the most real world of all. The recent few weeks our world has seen an outpouring of deep respect and regard for the late Queen Elizabeth II. Regardless of what we all might think of monarchy there was deeply seated warm response felt among many people towards her. What made her stand above all the other famous people in our society, the politicians and statesmen and women? I think it was because she embodied a set of spiritual qualities. Politicians deal with the affairs of the moment, administering the shifting challenges of our times. The Queen pointed us to eternal qualities such as wisdom, constancy, faith, grace, fidelity, dedication and service - a spiritual part to our being.

Getting back to our thought about wisdom, I suppose the logic of what I'm saying is: if a society has a healthy spirit, it cherishes wisdom, and its children should grow up to become adults who are wise and live lives which are based less upon selfishness but more upon love and seeking the common good. In other words, that we become Christ-like in loving of our neighbour as ourselves which St Paul underlines in his letter to the Romans, is to discover that ‘*love is the fulfilling of the law”.*

In the meantime, we live in the real world, which you and I re-enter after this service, where many people manifestly fail to act wisely or unselfishly, who err and stray like lost sheep, where rights and freedoms are abused, where there is wilful hurt, destruction, deception, violence and death – in short breaking the law not only of God but of the land. And that’s where the work of your professions come to our aid to protect society from its worst tendencies - to thwart evil, uphold justice and to enable righteousness to flourish.

I hope this reflection on wisdom might inspire our prayers for you as you enter the place where you practice your profession – as members of An Garda Siochana, prison officers, probation officers, lawyers, and judges. We may not all achieve the wisdom of King Solomon, but I pray that as you make your assessments and judgements, as you weigh evidence, present cases, read reports, evaluate character and pursue truth, you might seek and find the wisdom of God – and by his Spirit *to* *discern good from evil*. May God bless your courts and make them places of wisdom and justice and may the light of his truth guide us in straight paths.

‘*Give your servant an understanding mind to govern your people able to discern between good and evil’*