

## WISDOM IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE<sup>1</sup>

**A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, 12 September 2021, being a remembrance of the events of 11 September 2001**

On 11 September 2001, Bev and I were in Boston, visiting Simon and his family. Ben, our first grandson, was nearly one year old. We were alerted to the unfolding events and watched as the second plane smashed in to the Manhattan tower and then as the two towers collapsed into rubble. Our daughter-in-law, Amy, had planned a morning tea for young mothers, all of whom still came, though stunned by what had happened. One of the mothers, married to an Asian postgraduate student at Harvard, was worried that her husband might be attacked by those who regarded all identifiable foreigners as guilty of the outrage. All of them were, understandably, unable to comprehend how anyone could hate the USA sufficiently to do such a thing.

The planes that hit the Twin Towers had taken off from Boston, chosen because they would be full of fuel, and nearly everyone we spoke to later seemed to know someone who had died. One of the flights had been used by Simon when, in a previous job, he had travelled regularly to Los Angeles.

A week or so later we were in a still shocked New York City. Parts of the subway being closed, we walked from midtown to as close to Ground Zero as we could, and where everything was still covered in dust. All the available sites were covered with photographs of missing persons. In Union Square, groups of citizens stood around debating what their nation should do now. Some advocated a devastating nuclear response that would wipe the Islamic world from the face of the earth. Others took a more measured line but none showed a clear understanding of the international situation that lay behind what had happened.

We were far from the public figures who made and implemented the policy following that day but we found ourselves close to the ordinary citizens whose lives had been changed forever by the hatred of terrorists. And we, too, have been affected. The certainty of our own lives has been shattered. The consequences of that day are still with us. The recent debacle in Afghanistan with its untold human consequences shows both how far and how little we have come from that fateful day.

The problem that we, as a society, alone or with other societies, and we, as individuals, always encounter in the face of disaster is how to act wisely. Our wisdom, or lack of it, may be visible only years later. This morning I want to centre our reflections through the concept of wisdom. In effect, this is a sermon about public wisdom. Proverbs says:

*Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice.*<sup>2</sup>

Our first reading from the Wisdom of Solomon came from the Apocrypha and from the style of biblical writing known as Wisdom Literature.<sup>3</sup> This style covers a number of books in both the Old Testament and the Apocrypha, including Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Apart from Job, which presents developed arguments, they are collections of sayings, mostly of two lines

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<sup>1</sup> Readings: Proverbs 1:20-33) Wisdom 7:26-8:1; Psalm 19; James 2:18-26; Mark 8:27-38

<sup>2</sup> Proverbs 1:20

<sup>3</sup> See Roland E Murphy, "Introduction to Wisdom Literature", in Raymond E Brown et al (eds), *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Englewood Cliffs, Simon & Schuster, 1990, pp.447-452

and often in the form of Hebrew poetry. They are pithy and to the point. They may be in the form of commands or of prohibitions: “Do some things and do not do others”. Sometimes the prohibitions are strengthened with a motive to encourage compliance. Do this and good will follow. We should not let their folksy character deceive us into dismissing them.

Wisdom literature specialises in the human response to the environment in which we live. In short, it is about how we live in the real world. The writers were well aware of the ambiguities of life. They confront customary perceptions and seek to give guidance. The writers knew that everything was in the hand of God but that that did not take away the responsibility of humans to own their lives and make decisions.

Actions, however, have consequences. Sometimes, especially in Proverbs, wisdom, and its opposite, folly, are identified with justice and wickedness. Most often, the consequences are described as reward or retribution but, when observed closely, are the ordinary results of behaving wisely or foolishly. As Jeremy Begbie says,

... gaining wisdom concerns much more than amassing data for the mind’s scrutiny. It is practically geared. To be wise means being able to discern what is going on in specific, down-to-earth situations and to judge what it is right to say and do in those situations in a way that is faithful and true to God. We become wise *in order to live well*.<sup>4</sup>

We know that the Bible is a far from sanitised book. It does not hesitate to show the imperfections of its principal characters. Neither does it hide from us the fact that large scale human actions are almost always accompanied by violence. We must know that from the history of the invasion of Australia by European colonisers. The country had to be taken by force.

Likewise, for example, the departure of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt, as recorded in Exodus, was accompanied by violence. It can hardly be imagined that a society would allow its entire slave labour force to walk away. Neither ought we to be deceived by the way in which the authors of the Bible attribute everything to God. We already know that God is on the side of the oppressed and desires their freedom. In one sense, therefore, the associated violence is part of what must happen if the people are to be free. It is not that God desires or orders the death of the Egyptians in the Red Sea, but that human freedom, which is God’s plan, will involve it. Wisdom would suggest that we recognise this process and work to reduce rather than escalate violence.

How could we know what was the wisest response to the events of that day? We know what the actual response was and we now know how much that response was corrupted by the seeking for revenge and by lies and misinformation. We now know how we were deceived by our leaders and at what cost. We also know how the process corrupted us and left us with short-term safety but possibly longer-term danger.

In today’s gospel, Jesus talks about the futility of self-seeking:

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<sup>4</sup> Jeremy S Begbie, *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music*, Grand Rapids, Baker Publishing Group, 2007, p. 20

For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?<sup>5</sup>

A wise approach to his words would recognise that the self-denial he proposes is that we should not seek for ourselves but for others. In the face of violence, the wise alternative is to seek healing. If there is no healing, no end to self-seeking, death is the endless cycle.

One of the greatest enemies of wisdom is hubris,<sup>6</sup> or overweening pride. This is an arrogance exhibiting itself in, for example, an unshakeable belief that one knows the truth, an inability to admit wrong and a refusal to accept responsibility. As Proverbs says,

Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.<sup>7</sup>

The opposite is humility, as Proverbs goes on to say,

It is better to be of a lowly spirit among the poor than to divide the spoil with the proud.<sup>8</sup>

Was it hubris that led us into conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq without clear objectives and without clear exit strategies?<sup>9</sup> In June 2010, Rowan Williams, then Archbishop of Canterbury, preached at a special evensong for the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Royal Society, the world's oldest scientific academy.<sup>10</sup> His text spoke of wisdom and also came from Proverbs: "Whoever finds me finds life"<sup>11</sup> He said that the wisdom described in Proverbs is "a wisdom constantly returning to humility and unfinished business".

We can be in no doubt that there is much unfinished business arising from 9/11, from our responses to it and from the responses of those who became our enemies. We know that ideological terrorism neither apologises nor forgives, that terrorists see themselves as heroes. Bringing past conflicts to life, Islamist extremists refer to present-day Americans and Europeans as 'Crusaders', showing how far we have yet to go with them. Wisdom suggests that we should decline to sing from their book, to allow them to set the agenda.

In his Evensong sermon, Williams went on to say:

Faith, our Christian faith, presupposes that we are indeed as human beings attuned to truth and to growth, made by a God whose love has designed us for joy, and discovering that this directedness towards joy mysteriously comes alive when we look into the living truth, the living wisdom, of the face of a Christ who drives us back again and again to question ourselves so that we stay alive.

Commenting on the events of 9/11 in the *Sydney Morning Herald* last Thursday, Tim Lynch contrasted the reactions of those directly involved with the inadequacy of government responses. He said that "[t]he heroes of that morning were firefighters, cops, passengers and office workers".<sup>12</sup> On this 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, our focus must be on the "firefighters, cops,

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<sup>5</sup> Mark 8:37

<sup>6</sup> [Hubris vs. Wisdom - It's Ethics, Stupid! \(ethicsstupid.com\)](http://ethicsstupid.com)

<sup>7</sup> Proverbs 16:18

<sup>8</sup> Proverbs 16:19

<sup>9</sup> Craig Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2021, p. 30

<sup>10</sup> [Archbishop celebrates 350th Anniversary of the Royal Society \(archbishopofcanterbury.org\)](http://archbishopofcanterbury.org)

<sup>11</sup> Proverbs 8:35

<sup>12</sup> Tim Lynch, "September 11 ushered in age of panic", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 September 2021

passengers and office workers” who suffered that day and those who continue to suffer from those events and from the subsequent actions. Beyond that, we must always seek to act wisely.

A poem by the New England Quaker, John Greenleaf Whittier, author of the hymn “Dear Lord and Father of mankind, forgive our foolish ways”:

### **Forgiveness**

My heart was heavy, for its trust had been  
Abused, its kindness answered with foul wrong;  
So, turning gloomily from my fellow-men,  
One summer Sabbath day I strolled among  
The green mounds of the village burial-place;  
Where, pondering how all human love and hate  
Find one sad level; and how, soon or late,  
Wronged and wrongdoer, each with meekened face,  
And cold hands folded over a still heart,  
Pass the green threshold of our common grave,  
Whither all footsteps tend, whence none depart,  
Awed for myself, and pitying my race,  
Our common sorrow, like a mighty wave,  
Swept all my pride away, and trembling I forgave!<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> John Greenleaf Whittier, <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/forgiveness/>

