

11<sup>th</sup> after Trinity 2017

Imagine a respectable grocer's shop in Edwardian Ealing, queen of the West London suburbs, a few years before the 1<sup>st</sup> World War. A small boy is waiting in the queue with his maiden aunt Edith. Suddenly he pipes up: 'Aunt Edie, why did Solomon go after strange women?' History doesn't relate what answer, if any, she gave to my cousin Will. But the story of King Solomon's fall from grace, the way in which his many wives encouraged him to worship gods other than the God of Israel, is a sad one, especially given the positive start to his reign of which we heard in this morning's OT reading. He prayed, we heard in that reading from the first book of Kings, for an understanding mind, for wisdom to discern good and evil...a prayer made in his concern for the well-being of his people. But his later excesses, as the writers of the books of Kings see it, lead first to the division of his kingdom, and then, as the tragedy unfolds, to repeated acts of apostasy and faithlessness, and ultimately to disgrace and exile for the descendants of the peoples Solomon had governed. If only...if only Solomon had rested content with the gifts which God had given him, not only wisdom, but material prosperity. If only he had lived with a deep sense of gratitude to God, perhaps the restlessness and dissatisfaction suggested by his later life would not have surfaced. St Paul has the answer, surely, when he says, 'by the grace of God I am what I am'.; God has made me what I am and I must be grateful! The least of the apostles, because he had persecuted the church of God: but now allowing the grace of God, the generosity of God, to be at work in him. For 'it was not I, but the grace of God which is with me', he writes.

Why *did* Solomon go after strange women? After all, he had been granted the gift of wisdom and discernment, and given the promise of length of days if he would only be faithful to His God. Or why did the Pharisee of today's gospel trust in himself and despise others? He had the gifts of membership of God's chosen people, knowledge of God's covenant with His people, he had the law, the promises. Well, we might say of Solomon and the Pharisee, they were 'only human'. Lust, pride, greed...a familiar list. Original sin is the title at the top of the list. But the publican went back to his house justified rather than the Pharisee, because in the end it was he who had discernment, the real wisdom, the proper understanding of himself. But then 'Lord have mercy' isn't the end of the story. It's the prayer, the prayer of wisdom, or discernment about ourselves, which unblocks the channels of God's grace, so that we may truly say, 'by the grace of God, we are what we are', and get to work as witnesses to the living Christ, only through the grace of God which is with us.

This applies to each one of us in our personal lives and decisions, our conversations and encounters; as each day begins and ends, and no doubt at noonday as well, and throughout the day, we must pray, 'Lord have mercy', so that God's life-giving grace may flow through us. But what about the church as a body? The Church of England, this parish church? How many millions of prayers, I wonder, have been offered by Christians, asking, like Solomon, for wisdom and discernment? And how often have Christian communities suffered from the pride and self-satisfaction of the Pharisee, or turned away from the path of faithfulness to the God who is always faithful? For yes, the church, any church, is a human institution, formed of fallible and sinful human beings. The Church may be properly understood as One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic, embodying the very person of Jesus...we are, as Paul proclaimed, the Body of Christ...a 'high church' statement indeed. But being human, and part of a human institution, Christians have had to devise many and various patterns of governances at different levels of church life...synods, councils, committees. Lord have mercy, indeed. Now, in the discourses of Jesus at the Last Supper recorded in St John's Gospel, he promises that the Holy Spirit

would lead the community of his followers into all the truth. It doesn't require a particularly detailed knowledge of church history to realise that there have been myriad disagreements, claims and counter claims, about how to interpret that promise. As we must know well, this pattern continues in our own day. This very Sunday, and next Sunday, we are being given the opportunity to explore how best to live together in unity as one particular parish community, part of the Church of England, over the issue of the sacramental ministry of bishops, priests and deacons. As we take this opportunity, no doubt we pray for wisdom...but with an awareness of how easy it is to slide over into the paths of foolishness, of arrogance, of self-serving. Lord have mercy upon us, yes; and then we would do well to go on to pray in words from that tremendous post communion prayer in the BCP: with God's assurance that 'we are very members incorporate in the mystical body of thy Son, which is the blessed company of all faithful people...and we most humbly beseech thee (most humbly, notice: Lord have mercy)so to assist us with thy grace that we may continue in that holy *fellowship*, and do all such good works as thou hast prepared for us to walk in'.

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