

Scripture : Job 28 vv20-28 / John 6vv25-35

Text : ***Where then does wisdom come from? Where does understanding dwell?***
(Job 28 v20)

IN THE NAME OF GOD, FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT, AMEN

With its great vision, not just of a church but of a school in every parish, a commitment to education lay at the heart of the Scottish Reformation.

And as is evident in the training and formation of its ministers, the resources provided for elders and church members, the vast amount of material produced for children and young people, or the continuing presence of chaplains in schools, colleges and universities, a commitment to education and life-long learning remains one of the Church of Scotland's priorities.

So it is a pleasure for Margaret and me to join you today at Glasgow University, one of Scotland's ancient seats of learning, and as Moderator it is my privilege to bring you the greetings, prayers and good wishes of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.

Where does wisdom come from?, asked Job, '*where does understanding dwell?*' and although he lived hundreds, indeed thousands of years ago, in a culture and context very different from our own, Job's concern resonates down through the years.

Wisdom, understanding: my friend Rachel was travelling on a train from Aberdeen to Edinburgh.

The train was busy, an elderly couple sat opposite, and when the train stopped at Dundee, the fourth seat at the table was taken by a young man wearing a naval uniform.

He will be going to the naval base at Rosyth, thought Rachel, and so as the train approached Inverkeithing she was not surprised when the young sailor rose from his seat, took his canvas bag from the luggage rack, and made his way along the carriage.

Suddenly Rachel noticed the sailor had forgotten his naval coat.

What was she to do?

Pulling it down from the rack she ran along the carriage to try and catch him.

The young man was nowhere to be seen – and on an impulse she opened the carriage door and flung the coat onto the station platform.

Returning to her seat Rachel started to explain to the older couple sitting opposite what she had done with the coat – at which point the young sailor returned from the toilet having changed into his jeans and casual clothes.

Poor Rachel!

Thinking she had done the right thing, she was now left with the prospect of explaining to this poor lad that if he wanted his coat, he would find it lying on the platform of Inverkeithing station.

Of course we laugh at the story, but when we do I wonder if we really laugh at ourselves because my suspicion is we would all have such a story to tell.

And it is a poor excuse to say that like Rachel, we thought that we had done the right thing because it is patently obvious that she didn't - and neither did we!

And that is just the point, how do we know, how do we tell the right thing to do?

In the great scheme of things, the matter of a seaman's coat is of little consequence but clearly there are issues in life when knowing the right thing to do would be of great benefit.

What is the right thing to do regarding Brexit or the possibility of Indyref 2?

What of global warming?

What of the continuing scandal of homelessness in Scotland?

And mindful of what the Governor of the Bank of England, Mark Carney, said in a speech to Liverpool's John Moore University in December last year, what too of a society where for many the lived experience of globalization is low wages, insecure jobs, stateless corporations and striking inequalities?

This much is surely true; when dealing with such complex social, ethical or political issues there is no single right thing to do, certainly no single right Christian thing to do, and we should be suspicious of anyone who suggests otherwise.

Instead there are choices to be made – and for people of faith the question becomes the extent to which our faith informs these choices.

This was one of the questions which perplexed Job?

As much as Job believed in God, his faith offered him neither comfort nor insight.

In accordance with the accepted teaching of his day, Job believed God prospered those who were faithful and obedient to God's laws and punished those who were not.

Yet Job saw little evidence to support the prevailing orthodoxy.

To the contrary Job saw that sometimes good people suffered while wicked people prospered.

And when Job reflected on the circumstances of his own life, he was led to a similar conclusion.

Job counted himself a righteous man, someone who had done everything God could have expected of him.

Yet Job's life was in ruins, and all his achievements had turned to dust.

The story of Job and his comforters is part of the wisdom tradition of ancient Israel.

Rather than the great religious issues of the Temple or the law, the things that so troubled the priests and the prophets, the wisdom teachers took for their subject matter the common things of life such as bringing up children, spreading gossip, keeping bad company, unscrupulous business practices, and even good table manners.

Furthermore, while priest and prophet appealed to divine revelation as the source of authority for their teaching, as evidenced in the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job, the wisdom teachers appealed to nothing more than common sense.

And common sense told Job something was wrong because his life experience did not match his understanding of God's presence and purpose in the world.

There is not the time to rehearse the debates between Job and his three friends, the comforters so-called, suffice to say that come the end of the book, it is questionable if Job's concerns are ever fully resolved.

Question is answered by question, and at the heart of the questioning stands God, the God whom Job insists must at least be just.

If it is true that bad religion answers the unanswerable while good religion cherishes the mystery, then in the coruscating story of Job do we discern at least something of the purpose of faith?

Job's faith did not immediately provide him with answers to the difficulties and dilemmas of his life.

What it did do, however, was to bring him to worship, that is, to encounter the living God.

Furthermore, in his encounter with God, Job found the resources and was given the strength and courage to continue to live.

Jesus was often described as a good teacher and reading the gospels you cannot help but notice how clearly Jesus stands within the tradition of the wisdom teachers.

One question is answered with another question, and when given a problem to resolve, Jesus would tell a story about a man attacked on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, or a farmer scattering seed, and rather than providing an answer Jesus would leave his listeners to work it out for themselves.

What we discern is this; that rather than providing a formula for living, what Jesus gave his disciples was nourishment, the bread of life he called it, and with it the promise that whoever ate of this bread would never go hungry.

Another friend, George, a Kirk elder and primary school head-teacher, got up one Sunday morning with too much preparation and too many problems to resolve to have time to go to church.

At the last second George changed his mind – and to his astonishment it felt as though much of the service, the prayers, the Bible reading, the hymns and the sermon, were for him and him alone.

How could that be, George wondered, until it dawned upon him; it wasn't his minister who knew anything of George's worries and concerns that morning.

God knew what George was feeling, God knew what George was worried about, and in the encounter with the living God that is worship, George was brought into the light and peace of God's presence and given the courage and strength he required.

So where does wisdom come from?

And where does understanding dwell?

Compassion, forgiveness, mercy, generosity, hospitality, a commitment to healing and reconciliation: these are the gifts of faith offered in love for the journey of faith and live by the One who is the bread of life.

Of course, these gifts alone will not save us from the occasional Rachel moment – nothing I suspect will save us from that – but if from them we dare draw our nourishment, and let them inform our judgment, then in all the opportunities and challenges of life our feet will be set on the path of wisdom and the road to understanding.

Now unto him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end, Amen