

# Whose Wisdom?

Fr. Thomas Ryden

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Readings: [Wisdom 1:16–2:1; 2:12–22](#); [Psalm 54](#); [James 3:16–4:6](#); [Mark 9:30–37](#)

Maybe you have heard the popular distinction between wisdom and knowledge, that one's knowledge can be measured in terms of the amount of information you keep in your head while wisdom is the ability to know what to do with that knowledge. If knowledge is a matter of volume, then wisdom is a matter of application.

And I suppose this is a fine enough distinction. It gets at the reality that wisdom is borne out as much in doing as in knowing. It helps us understand that I can be smart and still be a fool. But even so, I think this definition of wisdom introduces a little too much subjectivity into the equation. Because of course the same sort of knowledge can be used in a vast variety of ways. A knowledge of chemistry can be used to heal or to poison. A knowledge of the culinary arts can be used to make an apple pie or a deconstructed brussel sprout. A knowledge of music can lead to a Sufjan Stevens, but it can also lead to Creed. I think what I am getting at with the hole in this definition of wisdom is that for wisdom to be true wisdom, it must be anchored in and focused by the proper set of values. If wisdom is the harnessing of knowledge into action for an intended purpose, then the values that guide that intended purpose become very important. Let's put it another way: what way of wisdom, whose way of wisdom will we follow? Wisdom takes knowledge and applies it in

working toward what is good. And so if we are off in what we think is good, knowing what to do with the knowledge we have will do us no good.

One of the first Christian documents that was written after the Scriptures and is a document called the Didache (or the Teaching). It frames the question of wisdom and values this way: "There are two ways, one of life and one of death; but a great difference between the two ways."<sup>1</sup> Here, the author, or authors of this early Christian letter are drawing on the tradition of the "Two Ways," a theme that is present throughout the Scriptures. Think of the book of Deuteronomy. As a kind of bookend for God's law, Moses says among his last words to the people of Israel: "I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live."<sup>2</sup> We see the tradition of the Two Ways of course in the Proverbs, in the contrast between wisdom and folly. Think also of the ending of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. What does Jesus say about listening to the words he has said and putting them into practice? He gives two outcomes: a house built on a rock and a house built on sand. Two ways. Two outcomes when the storms come in. So a biblical understanding of wisdom, or perhaps we could call it God's wisdom, is not just about amassing knowledge and having the ability to use that knowledge to our advantage. It is about the aim and ends of our use of knowledge and whether it is in alignment with God's created order and his will for the good of the whole world. If we are not in harmony with God's direction, we are not wise.

Because as we will see, there are some competing wisdoms out there.

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<sup>1</sup> Didache 1:1. Accessed at [NewAdvent.org](http://NewAdvent.org).

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 30:19

Our gospel passage for today illustrates well the contrasting wisdoms of the kingdom and of the world. And as an encouragement to us, even the Apostles, those great heroes of the faith, almost all of whom were so bought in to the wisdom of the kingdom that they laid down their lives for it, even they sometimes had a hard time with letting themselves get out of sorts with kingdom wisdom and values.

“What were you all talking about?” How many times have you asked that question when you already know the answer. Maybe you overheard, or you just have a very good intuition and so when the answer is honest, you aren’t surprised. Have you ever overheard someone talking about you, and you heard it, and had the courage to ask that question? You already know the answer, you just want it said to your face. And what happens in that situation usually? A lot of mumbling and staring at shoes.

That is the sort of situation we have in the Gospel. The disciples are chatting on the road, and it is not about anything good. It is a game of one-upmanship, a verbal tussle to see who among them is the greatest. Here is a sidebar, how foolish does one have to be acting to be bragging about their own greatness while in the presence of the Holy God? Lord have mercy on us when we do that very thing.

The text doesn’t tell us whether Jesus is informed by the Spirit, if he is using his intuition, or whether the disciples are just talking too loudly, but in any case, he knows what they are saying. And so he asks what becomes a rhetorical question, “What were you discussing on the way?” Maybe they are embarrassed and maybe they don’t want to get in trouble with their teacher, but they all keep silent. Deep down, they know they were being wrong headed.

In that moment at least, the disciples wanted the wrong thing, their conception of the good was tangled up in their own self interest. They were buying in to an alternate wisdom, which is ultimately a false wisdom.

Look out for yourself first. Make sure you get your own. These are messages that go beyond standing up for our basic dignity, and lead into a life that is focussed on and driven by the self. And the problem with the self is that it is too easily led by our passions and emotions. Again we're not talking about advocating for our own worth as image bearers of God here, we're talking about the inward gazing of a self-centered life, where my wants and needs from moment to moment are the driving force behind what I deem to be right and good. We're talking about a world where I feel the need to tell others about how I am greater than them. It makes for a world of complete chaos.

Hear the word from James this morning: "For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice... What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> James 3:16, 4:1-3

When our values are inwardly focused and passion-dependent, our behavior will hurt the very ones we are called to heal in Jesus' name. James draws a direct line from quarrels, fights, and even murder to selfish ambition and being led by our passion.

I think there are times when the wisdom of the world is fairly easy for those of us who have been raised in the faith to spot, or at least refute. With the decline in the New Atheism movement that was so culturally forceful in the 2000s and 2010s, there is a natural hunger for all things spiritual, particularly among young people - a good book on this subject is *Hunting Magic Eels* by Richard Beck. And while this is certainly an encouraging sign, it comes with the reality that a largely secular society is seeking that spiritual fulfillment in some forms of new paganism – that which is purported to be wisdom, but is anything but. And so this is a thing we as Christians must contend with and be ready for, but my point is that this will often be very obvious. It is easy to spot and refute the wisdom of the world when it involves crystals and astrological charts.

Where it is harder to resist the wisdom of the world is when it is coated in language that has the appearance of things that are good. "I'm following my dreams." "I'm getting what I deserve." How about this one: "I'm following my heart."

The idol of self is not so altogether different from some of the many other idols vying for our worship in that it begins with something that has a kernel of truth. Without the proper boundaries, the good desire to provide for oneself and one's family and to be responsible with financial matters can turn into an idolatry of wealth where there is no such thing as enough. The good desire to bring order where there is not and

protect the innocent, when not aware of the pitfalls of authority, can turn into the idolatry of power where the ends justify the means. And the good desire to affirm our God-given dignity and worth and to advocate for ourselves, when not coupled with humility, can become the idol of a self-centered way of viewing the world.

It is easy for some of us to reject hedonism and paganism when they are lit up in neon. It becomes more difficult when they come with a cushy paycheck or are sold to us as "self-care."

This is why self examination is something we have to be doing constantly as we assess our spiritual health. What are my motivations? To whom am I listening? What assumptions am I taking for granted?

Jesus gives us a good test case. He says we ought to be the servant of all. Last. The furthest thing from the center of attention. Identifying with those among us the world considers to be of the least value. That is the remedy to the unhealthy view of self the disciples were flirting with while they were arguing along the way.

Preaching on this topic is tricky because I worry that those who might need to be reminded of their dignity will hear in these words that they aren't worth standing up for. If that is your inclination, focus on the child that Jesus brings next to him. Think of how he noticed and dignified that small and seemingly insignificant person. We're all going to be tempted like the disciples to put ourselves first. There is a difference between putting yourself first and protecting your God-given dignity. By saying that

those in his kingdom would take care of these little ones, Jesus makes a claim that in a rightly ordered society everyone is honored and protected.

The last will be first and the first will be last. Jesus will express the wisdom of the kingdom in this familiar way several times throughout the gospels. This is a wisdom that is in inevitable conflict with the me-first wisdom of the world. If we find that we can conquer that worldly wisdom in ourselves and begin to live the wisdom of the kingdom in our lives, we will find ourselves in the middle of that conflict.

Our reading from the apocryphal text the Wisdom of Solomon illustrates this tension well. Because the wisdom of the kingdom does not fit in well with the wisdom of the world and its aims, the world seeks to persecute those who practice it. The writer says that those wise in the ways of the world do not hope for the “wages of holiness” and that they consider the way of the righteous to be “strange.”<sup>4</sup> The result is contempt and eventually, worse.

This holds true when we live counter to the worldly wisdom of self-centeredness and self-promotion. At first, others may see us as a little odd, or quaint, but soon enough, different becomes threatening.

The clearest example of this, of course, is our Lord himself. What killed Jesus has been the subject of many a think piece over the years, and I have even heard that some have made the argument that he was really killed over his opposition to Roman taxes. I don't want to get into the business of declaring the one definitive and

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<sup>4</sup> Wisdom 2:22,15.

all encompassing reason for something as full of meaning as the cross, but I will say what I believe is part of the answer. The way that Jesus lived made those with the power to kill him uncomfortable because it contrasted with the way they were living. His wisdom didn't mix well with their own and misunderstanding turned to hate.

Jesus knew this and so he tells his disciples what will happen in our Gospel reading: "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him." We can tell that the disciples don't get it because they are afraid to ask him any questions about what he has just said, and then they immediately turn around in the story and start jockeying for worldly greatness over and against one another.

To embrace the wisdom of the kingdom is to embrace the conflict and suffering of the cross. A world that does not understand will quickly become a world that hates us for our differences, and we must be ready and willing to serve even in the face of suffering.

But note that Jesus' prediction about his own fate is not about the cross only. He knows his suffering will be vindicated in resurrection: "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise."

Living wisely will get you in the thick of trouble. Remember the cross. But remember also the empty tomb, and rejoice that one who writes the end of the story is the author of the wisdom to which we are called.



Whose wisdom will we heed this morning, every morning? There are a few options out there, many of them quite shiny and loud. But there is a better wisdom for those who would seek it. And it is only available through the God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.