**18th August 2024**

**Call to worship**

Our best ideas are nothing compared to those of the king of all creation.

We come together today to seek his wisdom, to ask for his mercy and to receive his grace. Amen.

**A gathering prayer**

Lord of all, you know our hearts, our hopes and our fears.

Please give us your wisdom to know what is best and to serve you and those around us as best we can.

Amen.

**A prayer of approach**

God, who is wise beyond our comprehension;

Creator, whose discernment directs the paths of the universe;

Father, whose loving guidance nurtures and protects your family:

we approach your throne in all our foolish vulnerability,

to learn and receive from you.

Amen.

**A prayer of adoration**

God, who is wise:

we worship and adore you!

God, whose ways are so far above ours:

we worship and adore you!

God, whose Spirit flows through all things:

we worship and adore you!

Amen.

**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

**A prayer of confession**

Lord, we confess that our priorities are wrong.

We want wealth, to surround ourselves with material things;

we want health, to have long life to enjoy them.

But what are wealth and health

without the wisdom to use them well?

We confess that we think first of the benefits to us,

and not of the ways we might use these gifts for others.

Father, we repent of this selfish lack of judgement.

Grant us wisdom above all things, we pray.

Give us discernment to know your will

and to walk in your ways, so that our lives,

long or short, filled with riches or the lack of them,

may be filled with loving intent for the well-being of others.

Amen.

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Father, we are foolish creatures fumbling our way through life.

We mostly mean well, but fail to do it;

our actions fall far short of our intentions.

Yet you forgive our frailty;

you, who are perfect, forgive our flawed human characters.

Thank you for the assurance of your forgiveness!

Amen.

**A prayer of praise**

We thank you, Almighty God, for your Word; the wisdom within your Scriptures is comfort and counsel to our mortal minds.

And we praise you, Lord, for the gift of your Son, who walked among us in wisdom; we are blessed if we follow in his footsteps.

Thank you, Father, that there is wisdom to be found when we seek it, earnestly desiring to be of one mind with you.

Amen.

**Early on in the film The Lion King, the young lion prince, Simba, sings a lively song called, ‘I just can’t wait to be king’**. In it he argues with his royal minder, a hornbill, that he doesn’t need to follow rules and boundaries because he will soon be king and able to tell everyone else what to do. The hornbill tries heroically to convince the young prince that there is more to kingship than getting your own way, but it takes tragedy, the passing of time and a threat to his family before Simba realises that a king is meant to serve his people – not the other way around. Solomon seemed to understand this from the beginning, and it was to the benefit of his whole kingdom.

**From childhood, I have played the game of ‘What would you do if you found a magic lamp?’** I remember when everyone realised you could wish for more wishes (until the genie in Aladdin told us that was out of bounds), but we would usually talk about the things we would ask for: grand houses, expensive cars or helicopters, larger muscles, a lemonade fountain or a McDonalds restaurant in our kitchen!

Now that most of us have moved beyond childhood, what would we ask for? Guaranteed health? Protection for our family? Enough money to be comfortable and secure? Solomon effectively gets that question from God, ‘Ask what I should give you.’ He is already king; he already has the wealth that David accumulated – but a king in those days was never totally secure. There were always enemies gathering at the borders or your own tribes grumbling over perceived injustices. There was also illness and disease and, in an age many centuries before our NHS, it would have been understandable for Solomon to ask for health and long life. Instead, he asks for wisdom. It’s worth noting that this isn’t wisdom for his benefit – it isn’t so that he can launch the next killer app or become a business tycoon, or so that he can out-scheme his rivals in the Near East. Solomon asks for wisdom not for his own benefit but to help him serve others better. He simply wants to govern the people of Israel well. It is this selflessness that God rewards.

As we pray for our own futures, are we thinking about other people? Are we praying prayers that will see others blessed and not just ourselves? Today’s passage would suggest that this is the path of wisdom.

**A simple worship activity E S A**

**Sharing our hopes with God.**

You will need: seeds (one per person), glass beads, pebbles.

Give each person a glass bead, pebble or seed. ***Solomon shared with God his deepest fear – that he would not be able to lead Israel well enough. He also shared his deepest hope – that God would bless him and use him as he had his father, David.***

Play some quiet music and invite people to hold their bead/pebble and be as honest with God as Solomon was. ***What are they most worried about? What do they hope God will do for them?***

Follow up with the Go with God 24/7 activity, or invite everyone to take their bead/pebble home with them, as a reminder of their request.

**Plant a seed E S A**

**Receiving God’s grace.**

You will need: a large tray filled with soil; seeds; a watering can.

Have a tray of soil at the front of church with a pot of seeds beside it. If following on from the previous activity, ask people to come to the front and push their seed into the soil. Otherwise, invite them to reflect on what they would ask God for today before planting their seed.

When all the seeds are planted, water them with a watering can to symbolise God’s grace being poured on our prayers. Seeds don’t grow themselves – they receive from the soil, the rain and, eventually, the sun. Likewise, we give our prayers to God and receive from his grace as opposed to our own effort.

- you will need to move this tag depending on where in the magazine PDF the prayer is inserted.

**II Samuel 18:5-9,15, 31-33**; **I Kings 2.10-12;3.3-14**

**Sermon**

Today we bring to a close our summer sermon series looking at the life of David from the Old Testament and then the start of the story of his successor Solomon.

We find David at the end of his life, with declining powers, bedraggled with family feuds and attempts to succeed him as King.

I am starting with last week’s lectionary reading from the second book of Samuel chapter 18, which tells of the rebellion and the death of one of his sons Absalom.

What we pass on to our children is always a cause for concern.

During his lifetime General Douglas MacArthur personified the best of America to millions of people. His determination and courage during the tumultuous years of World War II established him as a leading figure in world history. But among all the general’s great leadership achievements during those years, there was one achievement that towered above them all. Douglas MacArthur had a son. He wrote a prayer that revealed what he hoped he would pass on to his son.:

*‘Build me a son, O Lord, who will be strong enough to know when he is weak, and brave enough to face himself when he is afraid; one who will be proud and unbending in honest defeat, and humble and gentle in victory.*

*Build me a son whose wishes will not take the place of deeds; a son who will know you O God .. and that to know yourself is the foundation stone of knowledge.*

*Build me a son whose heart will be clear, whose goal will be high, a son who will master himself before he seeks to master other men; one who will reach into the future, yet never forget the past.*

*And after all these things are his, add, I pray, enough of a sense of humour, so that he may always be serious, yet never take himself too seriously. Give him humility so that he may always remember the simplicity of true greatness, the open mind of true wisdom and the meekness of true strength.*

*Then I, his father, will dare to whisper, ‘I have not lived in vain’*

For all his contributions to world events, General MacArthur believed the greatest contribution was in raising his son.

However, it can also be true that children take on their parents' bad qualities and magnify them much more readily than they adopt their good qualities. Absalom, David's third oldest son, seemed to exemplify this observation perfectly.

Maybe, being the son of a princess (3.3), David felt obliged to spoil him. Maybe, befitting one raised in the lap of luxury, David impressed upon him that the world owed him happiness. If the kid turned out to be a spoilt brat, we could expect that. What is surprising is that darling little Absalom, although horribly self-absorbed, somehow learned the value of such great patience. Absalom knew how to wait years, if necessary, for just the right moment.

When his baby sister Tamar, for instance, confessed to him that his big brother Amnon had raped and defiled her (13.20), Absalom did not risk giving in to impulsive anger. What didn't help matters was his father's attitude. While David was troubled by what his first-born son had done, he didn't even go as far as reprimanding Amnon. So Absalom waited two full years before deciding to put things right himself. He then invited the prince-in-waiting to a sheep-shearing party, and had Amnon murdered, thus making himself the next in line to the throne.

It proved to be the beginning of his public career and, at the same time, the beginning of the end of his relationship with his father David.

There was something dashing about Absalom that the public just couldn't get enough of. Perhaps it was that magnificent head of hair of his. Once a year he would have it trimmed, (2 Sam 14.26) and the clippings tipped the scales at three and a half pounds. Whether it was the way he dispatched his brother Amnon or set fire to Joab's (David’s right hand man) hay field, (2 Sam 14.28-33) all of Israel found such daring-do irresistible.

Absalom began to see that the throne was his for the taking if he just played his cards right and bided his time. He did; and when the moment finally came, about half of the country was already behind him.

It is hard to tell what was going on in the mind of David all those years. Letting Absalom know that he should stay away from the palace until he got over Amnon's murder, then letting him come back to Jerusalem for two full years without even so much as laying eyes on him. Then, finally letting him back in his good books.

Then David looked the other way as Absalom planned a coup d'état right under his nose. What was the normally shrewd David thinking as he watched this whole performance acted out before his eyes?

Absalom was as cold and calculating and ruthless a child as had ever sprung forth from his loins and David knew it.

Somehow, however, he just couldn't come to terms with it, even when his own life and the throne were on the line.

David comes over as a man who is tired of life, with waning powers and a sense of fatalism. Maybe the cataclysmic events of his adultery and the killing of his mistress’s husband and living with all that guilt has eaten him up. It is a searching question – what could David have done to prevent this tragedy?

Ironically, it was that beautiful hair of Absalom that proved his undoing. He gets it caught in the branches of an oak tree when his mule tried to run under it – the verse (2 Sam 18.9) literally translates as hanging between heaven and earth. It is an odd phrase that suggests he is suspended between life and death, between the sentence of a rebel and the value of a son, between the severity of a king and the yearning of a father.

David is suspended between public victory and the survival of his throne, and private grief and the loss of his son.

David's army had been chasing Absalom all day long and find him there swaying in the breeze. In spite of David's specific orders that not a hair on Absalom's head was to be harmed if they ever caught up to him, Joab decided to get even for Absalom's hay field caper and save the nation in one fell swoop. Joab ran Absalom through right where he hung and then had somebody else report the news to the king.

When David got wind of it, the author of this richly told tale says, he cried out in his grief.

*"O my son Absalom, my son, my son! Would I had died instead of you !"*

It was deep, sincere and gut-wrenching and the most honest David ever sounded about anything. Even when his soldiers tried to comfort him with the knowledge that the rebellion had failed, and even when his right hand man Joab got plain stroppy with him for seeming to be totally ungrateful to the very men who had remained faithful to him, all David could really say was, "But he was my son!"

It was David, as conflicted as we have ever seen him, completely stripped of his own ambition and need to be in charge. Now, there was absolutely no chance to be reconciled with a son whom he had lost a long time ago. That was all that mattered.

We all know of the trials and tribulations of the British Royal family over the past few decades. It has also probably reminded us all that this modern myth called "family" is not all that it is cracked up to be.

It's not just royal families that have to endure heartache and tragedy. We would like to think that family life ends in some happy resolution about things. But rarely, in fact, is that the final act in the play. More often than not, some things don't manage to come together between parents and kids. The bad things don't always get identified and sorted. The people who are supposed to set good examples don't.

Maybe we wish, like David, we could have stood in for our children, taking the blows that life seems to have in store for them. Maybe we feel those blows belong more properly to us. Maybe we wish we could live our children's lives for them, not just to control them, but somehow to make up for our own shortcomings as parents. But we can't live their lives and we can't turn back the clock.

Still, "What's gone and what's past help, should be past grief," wrote Shakespeare (The Winter's Tale). The only problem is: it isn't. How can you stop grieving for what's beloved even when it's past time for any loving thing to do?

The story of David, known as the greatest of the kings of Israel, ends not in happy retirement but in anguish, with David pouring out his deep grief and regret, not only over the death of a son, but the failure of his family. It is hard not to hear in those

tear-soaked words the deep sadness of just about any parent over the state of his or her family and the high-cost of fulfilling all those parental responsibilities.

There is no easy moral lesson here, at least no lesson the author expects us to somehow emulate. What there is - is the frank statement that both the parents and children we want are not necessarily the ones we get. In any family, even the best of them, there are always regrets. Things don't always turn out for the best. Parents disappoint us. Children don't always turn out the way we hope. As hard as we try, we can't always get it together and we can't always make things turn out right. Things happen. People change. Words get said that can never be taken back. And our lives are forever altered.

Stephen Covey in his famous book the seven Habits of Effective People has Habit 5: seek first to understand, then to be understood

"I just can't understand my son .. he won't listen to me". The absurdity of this statement is highlighted by Covey in emphasising the importance of listening in order to understand. Clearly the parent needs to stop and listen to the son if they truly want to understand him.

However most people want to make their point first, or are so busy looking for their opportunity to butt into the conversation that they fail to hear and understand the other party.

I don't know where God is in all of this. I don't know where God is when innocence is horribly betrayed or when tragedies that could have been prevented are not. I don't know where God is when, either as parents or children, we try our level best to make things right with those whom we have disappointed and those efforts end in failure.

But I do know that God was there in the cry of David that day. And I do know that God is there whenever

anybody cries out of a similar anguish of his or her own before a grief that will not be consoled.

Because I know God was there that day outside of Jerusalem when he could not live Jesus' life for him. Because the cross does not take away the hurts we do to one another. It just embraces them with a love that lasts.

When David finally does die Solomon seizes the throne. Solomon's appointment came as the result of conniving and deceit. It was consolidated by the deliberate murder of political appointments suggested by David on his deathbed. It reads like something out of Game of Thrones.

The new king goes to worship at the most prominent ‘high place’, where God appears to him in a dream and asks him what gift he would like.

It’s a bit like a Genie in the bottle. You have one wish what would it be?

Solomon chooses an ‘discerning heart’ to help him govern as wisely as his father. God, pleased by this request, because usually folk ask for a long life, much wealth and the death of their enemies!.

Solomon is all too aware of his own inadequacy for what lies ahead, saying: ‘I am only a little child’.

The reading does not specify Solomon’s age at the time he takes the throne. Biblical scholars suggest somewhere between 12 and 20 years old, whilst Solomon describes himself as ‘a little child.’ It seems safe to assume that he is very young for such a level of responsibility. The obvious route for Solomon would have been to follow his father’s instructions; however Solomon looks to God for guidance, asking for wisdom.

Over the next week, as many young people face their exam results, where do they look for guidance as they too make crucial decisions about their future? This summer has been one of conflicting examples: on the negative side we have the Southport stabbings, carried out by a 17-year-old, with many teenagers being convicted following the subsequent riots; on the positive side, Toby Roberts achieved gold in the men’s lead climbing and bouldering at the age of 19, and Sky Brown gained bronze in the skateboarding at the age of 16!

At a time when they may feel inadequate, or superior, depending on their results, how do we encourage young people to follow Solomon’s example and turn to God?

How do we reassure them that wisdom is worth more than wealth or long life?

An example of Solomon’s wisdom is recorded in the next part of 1 Kings chapter 3 (16.28). Two prostitutes come before Solomon claiming the same child is theirs. Solomon says he will slice the baby in half and they can have half each. At that point the real mother says no don’t od that give the child to the other mother, whilst the false mother says OK cut him in tow neither of us shall have him. Solomon decides that the mother who wanted the child to live is the real mother.

Now listen, if I was to suggest such an idea Safeguarding would descend on me like a ton of bricks. So ancient wisdom isn’t accepted as modern wisdom.

What about modern wisdom for how to keep our society together in the light of the recent riots over immigration and asylum seekers?

After the conflict….what next? History tells us that we often invest less in the making of peace than in the waging of war. Solomon asks for an understanding mind - not only an ability to make good judgements based on experience or age but on an ability to discern between good and evil; between what is presented and what is at the root of motivations and desires; between the surface and what is beneath it.

After the disturbing violence of the past week, wisdom will reside in how we understand and then address the causes. Wisdom, not judgement.

The activity of discernment is perhaps at the heart of how we live wisely in the world. Many voices compete for our attention and we can be taken in by superficial answers without doing the hard work of acquiring wisdom. In a world where conspiracies and lies often flourish, what could help us to develop the practice of discernment in our spiritual lives?

Solomon’s wisdom begins with humility. His recognition of his own youth and inexperience point him towards God.

How do we sum up the life of David? Solomon in his eulogy to his father sums him up in three words. Imagine having your life summed up in three words?

Solomon says this to God:.

*‘You have shown great and constant love to your servant David, my father, because he walked before you in loyalty, righteousness and integrity of heart.*’

Having put David’s life under the spotlight during these last few months you may feel that Solomon gives a generous description of his father. The portrait of David in the books of Samuel and Kings is conflicted:

We have known him as a brave, shrewd military tactician. We have known him as a man of faith and courage, eager to do the right thing before God and humble enough to admit his mistakes. We have also seen him as an adulterer, a murderer and a manipulator. Latterly he has appeared as a weak, vacillating father. His weakness as a parent, his inability to deal with the conflict between his children, set in motion the tragic end of his life.

History is always being revised. The heroes of one generation may not be the heroes of the next. What we praise in a person may differ from culture and context.

Thanks be to God that he has given us the Son of David, Jesus Christ. This Son of David guide us into an authentic humanity of compassion and love. This Son of David ensures that the words God uses to sum up our lives will be words of forgiveness and acceptance.

**Prayers of intercession**

God of creation, as the world turns and we gaze again upon harvest fields, we pray for wisdom to enable us to understand and deal with the challenges posed by climate change. The seasons are no longer clearly defined, and weather often behaves in extreme ways. For ourselves and our loved ones, we pray for the wisdom to be prepared and to take care both at home and abroad; to be aware of the dangers posed by extreme heat, and the consequences of weather events such as wildfires and flooding. For our leaders and climate change experts, we pray for the knowledge to find solutions and the wisdom to use them, putting people before profits so that we may find ways to live safely in our rapidly changing world.

Lord, grant us wisdom above all things.

Heavenly Father, we pray for all who are suffering from illness, whether they are at home or in hospital. These are difficult times for our health services; we pray for all who work within them, from indispensable cleaning staff and porters to those who must make difficult decisions regarding patient care and policy. May resources be distributed wisely and may no-one in need of care and attention fall through the net.

Lord, grant us wisdom above all things.

Lord, as knife crime continues to make headlines, we pray for all who have been affected by this in recent weeks, months and years. We ask for insight to understand why people carry knives, and wisdom for those in positions of power who seek to do something about it. With the help of education programmes in schools, schemes to help disadvantaged teenagers from falling into wrong ways of thinking and behaving, and discernment from those who supervise mental health care, may our streets become safer places.

Lord, grant us wisdom above all things.

Father, we pray for those in our own community who are in any kind of need today. Perhaps they are lonely; perhaps they are hurting in body, mind or spirit, not enough to draw attention, but silently suffering nevertheless. We pray for the wisdom to discern their needs and the understanding to help them. We pray for the bereaved, whose grieving goes on when the world around them has moved on; grant us insight into their pain, so that we might support them.

Lord, grant us wisdom above all things.

Lord God, we pray for all who lead us, at local level, in our nation, or on the world stage. May they be unafraid to admit their vulnerability, as Solomon was; may they seek wisdom above all things, not for their own good, but for the benefit of those they serve. Instead of self-seeking and empty rhetoric, may we have leaders with understanding, discernment, and good judgment.

Lord, grant us wisdom above all things.

In a world driven by social media, Lord Jesus, we pray for discernment in dealing with the conflicting messages we see there every day. May we have the wisdom to hold you as our example, rather than influencers; in our lives, let there be no place for ‘fake it until you make it’. Lead us to come before you in all our vulnerability and insecurity; answer our prayer for wisdom above all things, kneeling before you as Solomon did.

Lord, grant us wisdom above all things.

Finally, Lord, grant us the wisdom to know how to pray. As we bow our heads in church or go forth into a new week with fresh challenges in our own homes and communities, may we have the insight to see where prayer is needed, the wisdom to use it and the understanding that you answer in your own time and manner.

Lord, grant us wisdom above all things.

Amen

**A sending out prayer**

King of kings, you have all the wisdom, the glory and the majesty. Continue to give us your gift of wisdom each day so that we might serve you in all that we do. Amen.