

Solomon's Wisdom

Occasionally, you see a text come to life in front of you. And events this week, in which the church has been engaged, seem to have witnessed this morning's readings becoming 3 dimensional.

Both readings today are about the Kingdom of God – a phrase which already brings together the world of faith and politics. In fact, some scholars now translate the phrase, 'divine government'.

It's no wonder that so many Christians believe that faith and politics have little to do with each other. You have only to look at the mechanics of the political system we have inherited in modern Britain: Any kind of political leader must negotiate the world of public opinion on the one hand, and the power games of parliament on the other. And at present, this makes it virtually impossible for any leader to stand up and say, "Oh, I was wrong about that!" It would be political suicide. Can you imagine for instance, the field day that an opposition leader would have a prime minister admitted to a mistake.

When British parliament was first televised, I can remember Jasper Carrot was bemused – because he said, now that he could see all the MPs on the television, he could not work out where they kept the sheep! (If you have heard the noise that these grown ups make...)

The level of apparent accountability means that MPs and governments must be target driven so that they can prove their credentials to their peers, their constituents and their electorate. The result is a world in which politicians must inevitably seek short-term solutions to long term problems:

Every unsuccessful strategy will be succeeded by another successful strategy into infinity. These short-term strategies might have the appearance of producing results, but when considered more carefully they are always doomed to failure because they do not tackle the problems at their root. To do so would not yield the bold and short term results demanded by target-driven strategies. Only ingenious means of redefining success, or by imposing tougher means to achieve it.

Of course, it would take a bold government to abandon the target-driven result-seeking approach to politics. Only in appearing successful, only by appeal to facts and figures, can it hope to be re-elected. So it is not only governments than need to be challenged, but a result-hungry electorate.

At a local level we have seen the effects that targets set by central government have upon real people. The government department dealing with communities and local government have decreed that there should be no homeless people sleeping rough in the city by the year 2012. What the logic is, we can only guess. On the surface it may sound worthy, even admirable. But it takes little thought or reflection to see how ethically questionable it is. It has put local authorities in difficult positions, and resulted in homeless people being woken up and the only home that they have being hosed down. Nobody likes it, nobody wants to do it. It's just a regrettable necessity when targets have to be met.

Solomon governed a country: and at the beginning of his reign he is offered a gift from YHWH. Now, if you were a modern British leader and you were offered this, I wonder what

sort of thing you might ask for. Probably something target related. But Solomon's response seems almost like cheating. In the school playground, any child asked about what they would wish for, if they could wish for anything, and you would almost automatically get the 'I'd wish for three more wishes...'

That's almost what Solomon does. Solomon's response to God's offer is to request wisdom. Wisdom is to be found not in achieving this or that outcome, but in a wisdom that would manifest itself in the best possible outcome in all circumstances. And lo and behold, all the things he didn't ask for, he got anyway – the outcomes, looked after themselves, because Solomon was more concerned with the root rather than the fruit – and if you look after the one, the other will always be fine. If all we're concerned about is fruit and we neglect the roots – then the fruit will never be great anyway.

So there is some distance between a biblical picture of government, and the one that prevails today. This means that when some of us met with the Corporation of London this week, we had to remain aware that we were fundamentally at odds not only with the practices of dealing with homeless people in a particular way, but also with the very roots of those practices.

Most of us are now familiar with the basic story. The Corporation of London have been waking homeless people in the middle of the night, watering down their beds and forcing them to accept one of the prescribed outcomes, thus enabling them to meet their targets. And after several weeks of conversations, publications and exchanges, we had a meeting on Thursday morning of this week. The Corporation sent four representatives. We, the church, sent one! It was Jill! And then, we had a businessman, an academic who specialises in homeless policy, and the manager of a homeless community. I got to chair the meeting, which was a friendly if rather heated exchange.

The Corporation gave their rationale, and spent fifteen minutes doing so. Then it was Jill's turn. Now, several members of Xchange had worked hard to help put our case together. But by the time Jill got to deliver them, many of the carefully prepared points were no longer necessary. So, instead, thinking on her feet – Jill unpacked the Biblical concept of Justice to the Corporation of London. Let me say that again. The basis of our presentation to the political authorities of our city, was biblical exposition. And I watched everyone around the room sit there nodding!

And what did we see. A genuinely alternative way of understanding politics that was not target-driven, but that won the respect of those who were. Now, I have spoken enough of this. So at this point, I would like to invite Jill to come and speak in more detail about this meeting.