



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year B

Those who get Wisdom obtain friendship with God

Readings: Wisdom 7: 7-11, Ps 89, Hebrews 4: 12-13, Mark 10: 17-30

'Those who get Wisdom obtain friendship with God.'

In the liturgy of the Eastern Orthodox Church there is a moment, just before the recitation of the Creed where the command is given, 'The doors, the doors. In Wisdom let us attend.' The doors of the building are commanded to be closed because of both history and current reality.

The next stage of the liturgy is to proceed to the Eucharist, the invocation of the Holy Spirit and the manifestation of the Real Presence of Christ on the altar of sacrifice. The doors would be shut to recall the fact that what the community of the faithful were doing was, under Roman Law for the first three centuries, a capital offence. It was a matter of security. But it is also a statement that this is a moment of exclusion. Only the baptised who can say the Creed, the profession of faith, may proceed to the Holy Mysteries. The affirmation of the Creed becomes the gateway to that sacramental intimacy with God in Christ. What it reveals and what we assent to in it is indeed true Wisdom because it is the revelation of Divine Wisdom to Man. It is for this reason that the greatest church of Eastern Christendom, the sixth century architectural miracle that towers over the

Sea of Marmara, was named Hagia Sophia, the Church of the Holy Wisdom.

This is important because we live in an age which is not long on wisdom. Its preferred currency is 'opinion'. Opinion is cheap, changeable and largely irresponsible. It is the lifeblood of the social media – and deeply unpleasant much of it is – and it is the stock in trade of the Commentariat who increasingly govern, via mainstream media, the political outcomes of formerly democratic nations. You will be told what to think by the opinion columns of your newspaper and pressured by the lobby groups who dominate TV and Radio, into believing that dissent from any one of their latest obsessions is tantamount to an admission of lunacy, bigotry or 'medievalism'.

Nor should we be surprised by the apparent massive swings in popular opinion and cultural practice in our lifetimes. The science is now in. We often change our decisions and judgments to conform with normative group behaviour. Using functional magnetic resonance imaging it is demonstrable that conformity is based on mechanisms that comply with principles of reinforcement learning. Conflict with group opinion, or perceived majority opinion, triggers a neuronal response in the rostral cingulate zone and the ventral striatum similar to the "prediction error" signal suggested by neuroscientific models of reinforcement learning.

That is, to put it simply, when I find myself out of step with the popular view, my brain sends a signal, from its registration and rewards department, telling me that I have made a mistake, something that may isolate me from the pack and endanger me. The size of that 'conflict-related signal' predicts both subsequent conformity and the required

behavioural adjustments. The power of the media to determine the public response is, therefore, massive. Ironically you do not need a majority in a democracy, you just need your hands on the real levers of power. Hence the success of the lobby groups. They do not need to convince you and me. They simply need to hold the media and make you believe that, what you thought was true, virtuous and sensible is a strange minority view. The deeply embedded survival mechanism in the human brain tells us not to get cut off from the pack – even if, like the proverbial lemmings, the pack is heading over the cliff.

The Christian Faith has never had much truck with ‘opinion’. Opinion is temporal, fickle, unreliable, manipulable and often deeply misleading. The Faith looks to Wisdom, Holy Wisdom, Divine Wisdom, the eternal realities. The Faith looks to the Incarnation of that eternal and divine reality, which is Jesus Christ. To stand in the face of a cultural hurricane requires courage. In Europe the Christian Faith is regarded at best as a bizarre hobby, at worst as some sort of philosophical perversion because it cannot assent to the secular nostrums and the pride of Man. So we need courage. We need conviction. We need the reassurance that what we have is the eternal verities revealed to us in the Word of God and in the teaching of the Church. We need to pray for Wisdom and study our Faith.

Remember that if the martyrs had relied on public opinion and the subsequent ‘error code’ neuronal response in their rostral cingulate zone and ventral striatum they would have denied Christ, offered a pinch of incense to the divinity of the Emperor, left the slaughterhouse of the arena intact and got a comfortable job in the civil service. You and I would not have heard the Gospel.

They relied not on opinion but on the Divine Wisdom which is Christ. Let's hear the Word of God on this one more time: *'Therefore I prayed, and understanding was given me; I called upon God, and the spirit of wisdom came to me. I preferred her to sceptres and thrones, and I accounted wealth as nothing in comparison with her. I loved her more than health and beauty, and I chose to have her rather than light, her radiance never ceases. All good things came to me along with her, I rejoiced in them all, because wisdom leads them; but I did not know that she was their mother. I learned without guile and I impart without grudging; I do not hide her wealth, for it is an unfailing treasure for men; **those who get wisdom obtain friendship with God.**'*

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