**Judging for Justice: Following Wisdom's Hopeful Path**

Meditating on 1 Kings 3:16-28 and John 8:3-11

## Introduction

Geraldine Hawkes asked me to 'share something nurturing and nourishing for conference participants as they prepare to return to their place of work.' Well, you have participated in this conference and know a lot more than I do about achieving safe church communities. If I try to say something wise and meaningful about facing and dealing with abuse in church settings, I run the risk of being shot down for stating the obvious or simply being wrong in light of your discussions.

Since the Bible is more within my sphere of competency, I suggested that a biblical meditation might be in order and the planning committee graciously agreed with the proposal. Of course, Bible dictionaries, concordances or other tools don't list anything under 'Safe Churches', so I tried to think of a text or two that might help us to focus on the conference theme in a slightly new way. It's probably a good thing that I don't know all the issues you have discussed. So there can be no temptation to turn a text into a precise answer to a specific problem. You know, 'What does the Bible say about genetically modified foods?' doesn't get a quick answer from a biblical perspective. Neither does the concept of 'safe place' in the sense you have been using it. When OT writers speak about being in a safe place, they usually are talking about Israel enjoying a safe haven in the Promised Land. The concept is personalised in Psalm 4:8 where David sings, 'I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you, O Lord, make me lie down in safety.' Now it might be helpful to note how God is the ultimate source of safety, but we shall venture down another path, called wisdom's way, and hopefully still end up in a peaceful, hopeful and safe place.

I don't intend to provide a detailed exegetical commentary on the two texts I have chosen, but simply to open them up for your examination. Meditation is enriched by some attention to literary form and structure, to primary references and meanings. But meditation means, above all, placing oneself under a text and letting it work on us. I think that's what a famous continental biblical scholar of the 18th century, JA Bengel, meant when he wrote in 1734: *Apply yourself fully to the text and then apply it fully to yourself. (Te totum applica ad textum: rem totam applica ad te.)*

I invite you to apply yourselves as listen to some texts with me, to *listen* with attentive ears, but especially with attentive heart, for in biblical meditation the ear and heart are the primary organs of reception and perception—not the eye or the mind. Another reason for listening to the texts instead of reading them is that they had their origin in oral/aural cultures in which very few people could read or write.

## Searching for Wisdom

A possibly helpful biblical perspective that came to my mind was that of wisdom: wisdom as insight, understanding and practical action. Wisdom in Hebrew and Greek thought has to do with knowing how to *do* something, not how to *think* or conceive of something. It is not theoretical or intellectual, but experiential and practical. Wisdom includes artistic skill, as in making music, building, practicing crafts and so on, but also skilled execution in such diverse areas as fighting, farming, running a household, and hosting banquets. If I remember my Homer correctly, a soldier is 'wise or astute

(*sophos*) if he can wield a sword or throw a spear with skill. Skill is learned with practice, so wisdom involves learning from others and learning from one's own experience.

**Listening to 1 Kings 3:16-28**

The famous story of Solomon's judgment in the case of two women disputing over a child is meant, in its present setting, to illustrate how God answered Solomon's request for a 'listening heart' (3:9; the NRSV has 'an understanding mind' which intellectualises wisdom). Genuine wisdom arises from a heart directed to God. ('The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom'; Ps 111:10.) Solomon's fall comes when his heart is turned away from God, when his heart is no longer true to God (1 Kings 11:3, 4) because of his marriages to foreign wives. So the narrative of 1 Kings is not uncritical of Solomon.

Several factors indicate that the story has paradigmatic significance that extends beyond the reign of one king and one judicial case.

- In the first place the scene is meant to be typical. Solomon is not named expressly; the story simply speaks ten times of 'the king'. He provides a model of using wisdom to judge justly.
- Secondly, although the two feuding women are called 'prostitutes' at the beginning, they are then in the rest of the story simply referred to as women. The usual additions in translations of 'the *one* woman', 'the *other* women', 'the *first* woman' are additions. The Hebrew text simply has 'the woman' said …' and it is left to the listener (these are stories for the ear) to work out which woman is speaking.
- In the third place, stories of a mother rescuing her child abound in different cultures and different places. One OT scholar (Hugo Gressmann) has identified twenty-two stories in traditional folklore dealing with an abused mother and her endangered child. Striking is an ancient story from India in which a she-demon snatches a child left on a river bank. The demon threatens to tear the child apart when the mother demands it back. The demon finally gives it up when the mother refuses to accept half of her child (SJ De Vries, *1 Kings* in Word Bible Commentary, p. 58).
- Fourthly, the story points to other possible contexts and meanings. For example, Solomon's wisdom at this point has been seen in contrast to his later folly which led to his kingdom actually being cut into two realms, Israel in the north and Judah in the south (1 Kings 11:9-13). Thus, both realms are compared to prostitutes in the prophetic literature (relating v 16 to Jer 3:6-12; Ezek 16:15-46; 23:3-5; Hos 1:2). Another scholar sees eerie parallels between our story and the Passover. The exchange of sons takes place at night (Exod 12:29). The Egyptian sons die, the Israelite sons live. So the false mother is Egypt who cruelly smothers her own children and seeks to kill the children of another. Or parallels are drawn to the binding of Isaac in Genesis 22. In her willingness to give up her son the one prostitute acts like father Abraham. Another suggestion has the two competing mothers anticipate the two mothers of Galatians 4, the wives of Abraham, one of whom represents the old covenant, the other the new covenant.

Now some of these extended meanings seem to me to be a bit forced, to say the least. But I believe that it is right to look for connections with the story of Jesus. Which is why we will presently also look at John 8:3-11. But first, back to the story in 1 Kings 3.

There is no judgmental tone in the story of Solomon's solution to the dispute between two mothers—the fact that they are both prostitutes barely rates a mention. Yet that one

mention at the beginning is of some significance. Both of them are *to* be pitied rather than ridiculed or scorned because of their occupation. They are both victims of abuse in a patriarchal, male dominated culture. They are used and abused. They are continually in a very unsafe place. In Israel prostitutes could be *slaves* exploited by their owners for profit, *daughters* sold by their own parents to get out of crippling debt, or *poor women* who had never had the chance to be married or who had lost a husband and so lived without the household protection of a man. Whatever their individual history, they are all vulnerable and open to abuse.

In verse 18 the first mother who presents her story, and who is eventually revealed as the true mother, tells the judge, 'There was no one else in the house; only the two of us were in the house.' That comment not only forestalls any suggestion that a third party may have been responsible for the death of the on infant. It is also a reminder that these women are originally in a defenceless position. They are unsafe, they have no guardian.

There is, of course, a big difference between the two women. The one is revealed as uncaring or at least careless; she rolled over onto her child in bed, smothering it—yet another abuse victim in a whole cycle of abuse. She is guilty of child-slaughter at the very least, as well as heartless theft and brazen deceit. In front of the king she says nothing apart from simply contradicting the true state of affairs. She shows meanness of spirit that results in meanness in deed and word. But one is entitled to ask, what has she herself suffered in the past, before this sad episode, to be so cruel, so callous to another woman who, like herself, has just given birth?

In the end she gets nothing—in a double sense. Her terrible behaviour is exposed and she finishes up with only her dead child. But she also gets nothing in another more important sense that we shouldn't overlook. There is no moralising about her behaviour in the narrative. There is not one word of censure from the king—no hint of punishment for her brazen attempt to steal a child to cover up her own lack of maternal responsibility. She, too, experiences restorative justice. Though she has lost her child, she is at least saved from living a lie for the rest of her life, pretending to be Mum to a child who is not her own.

The real mother is the more obvious abuse victim: she is used by men yet despised by them; she now faces the prospect of not only losing her child, but losing it to one who has no right to be called a true mother. Further, the true mother is now threatened with going through life scorned as a monster who killed her own baby—in time, gossip would naturally turn negligence into willful murder! And the knowledge, all the while, that she was the victim rather than the offender would make taunting verbal abuse (especially from other mothers) even more intolerable. The loss of a son, moreover, means the loss of support in her old age. Her loss threatens to be miserably compounded.

Yet in the end, the true mother wins out. Why? She loves with wisdom and receives wisdom's judgment. She has a mother's heart that will not let the child that grew under her heart be killed. It is not a matter of making a choice between two options: sharing half of a dead child, or giving up a baby she knows is hers to preserve its life. The mother's heart dictates the only choice possible. A true mother is also a wise mother.

Now the story does not expressly mention the true mother's *heart*, but there is something even better in the Hebrew text. She pleads for the living child not to be cut in half 'because *compassion* for her son burned within her' (v 26). Now the Hebrew word for compassion is the plural of *rechem*, meaning the womb or uterus. In this instance,

compassion reaches out from the womb of a mother. It is 'wombly' pity, uterine compassion, for one whose life was a gift, and whose life must be preserved at all costs, even to the wounding of a mother's heart. It is wise, self-sacrificing love that triumphs.

Now to the third character in the drama, the wise ruler. Or is he so wise? His drastic solution to the problem is nothing less than perilous. Isn't he placing the disputed child in danger of ultimate abuse: the execution of an innocent? What if the women were to reach a compromise and agree to the grizzly judgment: half each? But that is, of course, impossible. Speculation whether the ruler might have allowed the sword to fall on the helpless child is beside the point. A judge who has wisdom in his heart recognises a true mother's heart. And so the story ends well with people praising the wisdom of the king. In so doing they recognise the greatness of God the giver of wisdom. Finally, the opening description of the women as prostitutes and the concluding mention of the ruler as wise belong together. A wise king will act justly to the lowest of his subjects.

We see that wisdom is creative and that judgment means restoring order. The Hebrew word 'to judge' (*shaphat)* means to set matters right, to come to the rescue of those in danger, like widows and orphans, and to put those already wronged in a better place. So the 'Judges' back in Israel's history were its Saviours, its rescuers from the attacks of enemies. And because the Lord's judgment means rescue and vindication, the psalmist can sing, 'Judge me O God and plead my cause against an ungodly nation' (Ps 43:1).This king's wisdom not only gives insight into what is true and just; it also creates a safe place for both women and the one remaining child. The one has her child restored; the other is saved from living a lie. One child lives on in a mother's loving care.

There is vindication without vindictive punishment of the guilty party. Wisdom has ensured that one hurt is not compounded by another which would mean that all parties, two mothers and two children, would suffer damage. Wisdom is not just love. It is insight leading to appropriate action, to prevention of abuse in the first place, to healing and to restoration when it does take place.

Solomon's wisdom is not outside the law, neither is it a simple enactment of a law. His listening heart is in tune with a true mother's heart, with her 'wombliness'. Solomon later loses his listening heart, so the true hero is not the ruler but the mother who saves her child's life.

Yet Solomon shows us how to follow wisdom's hopeful path in judging wisely and justly. Wisdom is God's gift to the king, not his natural intellectual prowess at work (see also 4:29 and 5:12). And it is a gift for the common good. Our story implies an important link between political and judicial structures and God's working in the world. God/wisdom is concerned about every aspect of human life and the created order. Wisdom extends to ecojustice as well as to setting the helpless, the disadvantaged and the abused in a good place. 'How individuals draw on and use divine wisdom will make a difference in how and whether life and well-being are promoted and advanced' (TE Fretheim, *First and Second Kings',* Westminster Bible Companion, 35).

The story is, finally, not just about a woman's triumphant love and a judge's true wisdom that cuts the Gordian knot of injustice. It leads us into other possible dimensions or horizons. As OT scholar De Vries says,

> Any person is close relationship to another needs to learn the danger of stifling another's life and spiritual growth by holding it too close to oneself. Important as various human relationships may be, the survival and integrity of the person being held in these relationships must always come first (p. 61)

**Listening to John 8:3-11**

It is important to acknowledge at this point that wisdom is not the prerogative of those who call themselves Christians. Solomon was an Israelite; we should expect wise judgments from all in authority—Muslims, Jews, atheists, whatever—not just from ministers and church leaders, but also teachers, police officers, judges and magistrates, politicians, doctors, social care personnel and all leaders whether professional or nonprofessional. There are times when all of us are called on to judge who is the 'true mother', meaning the abused person needing protection and the one whose cause needs to be heard with a listening heart of wisdom. *Divine* wisdom should be found in Christian communities.

All of us are occasionally called on to render judgment on human motives, opinions and behaviours, especially when they are damaging and hurtful to others. Where can we possibly get wisdom to determine the truth and act wisely? We present ourselves before another wise person who once wrote (probably names!) in the sand when judgmental men tried to use a women to get at him.

The story in John 8 may not represent the earliest tradition but breathes the spirit of Jesus who came to work restoration, not reparation, 'to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners' (Isa 61:1). This is a rather Lucan Jesus, with his compassion for sinners and his readiness to forgive rather than condemn (e.g. Luke 7:36-50; 15:1, 2; 19:1-10).

Our story was probably included here in St John's Gospel since it anticipates and illustrates what Jesus says in 8:15: 'I judge no one'. The woman receives no rebuke from Jesus. At the end she simply confirms the obvious: her accusers have disappeared. Jesus' final words are not an indication of her special guilt, but an invitation to a new future: 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.' To use St Paul's words in Romans 8, she can in future live in the glorious liberty of God's children.

Some things in the story are unstated. Was the woman a prostitute caught in the act—would a true professional be so easily caught out? Was she the victim of a set-up for some nefarious purpose—perhaps a betrothed or a husband trying to prove her unfaithfulness in order to get rid of her? Was she perhaps discovered being seduced by a man? And where is the guilty male with whom she was discovered? The names Jesus wrote in the sand could be the names of clients or of the men involved in setting her up. That would be enough to explain why the men slink away with their tails between their legs when they are invited to throw the first stone. Those who are intent on mob violence (in the name of the law, naturally!) are exposed as hypocritical cowards.

Here again, woman is the victim, man the abuser. The usual title of the story (something like 'Jesus and the woman caught in adultery') reflects a male ante-feminine bias and does not get to the heart of the matter. This woman is being used in more than one

sense—the ultimate sense being that she is the instrument by which Jesus' opponents want to expose him as a law-breaker, a teacher with loose interpretation of the Torah and lax practice. That's a charge familiar from other places in the Jesus tradition. That adds to the story's ring of authenticity. However, a better title than 'Jesus and the adulterous woman' would be 'Jesus exposes the hypocrisy of the theologians' (who are men). —The final victim of abuse in the story is, of course, meant to be Jesus, but he turns the tables on his enemies, and rescues a victim of abuse. The woman experiences rescue from Jesus who is God's wisdom incarnate.

There is a big difference between making informed and wise judgments on the one hand, and being judgmental on the other. In the end, Jesus *does* judge the woman, but in the sense that she is rescued from any evil past that might oppress her and from those who want only to denounce and condemn. They have to learn that to condemn others is to place oneself under judgment. Sinners can't throw stones at sinners because they are all in the same boat (see Romans 2:1, 22, 23).

**Conclusion**

Ensuring that congregations and church agencies are safe places is not just a matter of preventing abusers and healing the abused, that is, dealing with other people. It has to begin with us, for our basic instinct is to use others—ever so kindly and gently of course!—to advance ourselves, our interests, our goals, our opinions. This is the sin of self-idolatry for which there is only a radical cure. There is a biblical word that tends to be left out of Christian vocabulary and practice. It is 'repentance'—that life changing and behaviour transforming reorientation of the heart that is necessary if we are to be truly wise and live well. Before there can be a wise listening heart there perhaps has to be in us a broken and contrite heart and spirit that God will not despise (Ps 51:17).

We gain wisdom in following Jesus, in taking on his mind and heart. Our failures are forgiven in him. In him we are in a much safer place, not just safe from abuse at the hands of others. We are held back but from using and abusing others. In his fellowship we can provide a safe place for others. As Nicolas of Cusa said long ago:

> Jesus, the incarnate wisdom is the one who embodies the art of the Father, the craftsman who shapes the raw and ruined matter of this world into the kingdom of God, the teacher who instructs his disciples how to build well (Matt 7:24-27; Peter Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings* in Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible, 43)

What we seek to build well are faith communities in which people cannot just feel safe but are actually protected from danger. That takes more than love and good intentions. Church communities are to be not merely places of love, but wise love. Love without knowledge, insight and understanding can be as bad as knowledge without love, the error that Paul attacks in the Corinthian congregation. In the fellowship of Jesus we can hope for ever increasing wise love, for informed judgment and action that is both preventative and healing. IN him there is always hope.

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