

Heavenly Father, send your Spirit upon us so we may wrestle with the words of scripture as we seek to follow Jesus. A

- Some words from the end of our first reading: *‘Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky’.*
- Are you wise? Listen to the whole of that verse. *‘Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.’*
- Are you wise? And what do you mean by that? There’s different types of wisdom.
- Often people’s first thought about wisdom is that it’s the same as intelligence. But I’ve known some extremely intelligent people who are so wrapped up in their own particular sphere that they have no common sense at all and struggle even to boil an egg without burning it. Surely wisdom is more than mere intelligence?
- On the other hand, there’s another type of person who is bung full of good advice. Good practical advice. They seem to have an answer to everything and are never backward giving it, sometimes at great length. However although they are keen on imparting their wisdom on any topic under the sun, they are less keen on receiving it. Is this the hall mark of a wise person from the biblical perspective? I sincerely hope not!
- So what does it mean when we read, *‘Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky’.* What sort of person do you need to be to shine like the brightness of the sky? What does it mean to be ‘wise’?
- There is a venerable tradition of wisdom in the Old Testament. There’s even a book in the Apocrypha of the same name. When the bible speaks of Wisdom it usually means something of a divine spark that is imparted to the world. Christians might link that with Jesus especially in John chapter 1 when John speaks of the Word’. *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God’.* The language John uses for ‘Word’ comes from the same wisdom tradition. Christians might also link Wisdom to the Holy Spirit, and you can see why in both these linkages. The divine Jesus and the divine Spirit as gifts from God the Father to us. A divine spark in Old Testament terms.
- I’m not sure that’s what’s going on in today’s reading but hold that idea of a divine gift, a divine spark, travelling from God to us, when you think about being wise in today’s passages and see what happens.
- What does it mean to be wise?
- Mark, in today’s Gospel reading speaks of Jesus’ disciples marveling at the temple in Jerusalem. The temple was the greatest symbol of Jewish national identity, much as Westminster Abbey is such a symbol of our British Christian heritage, only more so. Much more so. It was brand new, overlaid with gold, glistening like a huge jewel in the crown that was Jerusalem. It was where God dwelt, and the Jews had built it themselves, bankrolled by King Herod. The stones in the walls were enormous, several yards wide and the whole temple covered well over an acre.
 - They were dead proud of it. It was theirs. Their fellow Israelites were involved in the construction. They said, *‘Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!’* Were they wise to be so proud of this symbol of national identity? Not a bit of it! Jesus squashes them completely with *‘Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.’* And you may know this happened just 40 years later just after St Mark finished his Gospel when the Romans destroyed it.
- So for readers of scripture, the first thing about being wise we can glean from today’s passages is that it is wise to rely on God’s strength, not our own. Our own efforts are often anything but reliable. Witness the pathetic attempts of human beings to do something to control climate change. It’s looking increasingly unlikely we’ll manage it. And yet we still jump into our cars rather than walk and buy plastic wrapped goods that have transported halfway round the world. Governments still seem to be investing in coal fired power stations and extracting shale gas from the soil. The temple was torn down!
- In the end we will be thrown back into the arms of God as the only way to control the climate crisis. But more of that in a minute ...
- ... because we don’t need to panic! Indeed we are instructed not to. The second half of our reading from the Good News of Mark gives a catalogue of resolutely bad news. Jesus says, *‘Beware that no one leads you astray.*

Many will come in my name and say, "I am he!" and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.' Does this sound like life today?

- But did you spot in the midst of this, those four little words, *'do not be alarmed'*?
- *'do not be alarmed.'* Don't panic. It's not wise to panic. God is in control not us. Of course it's wise to look at the world through God's eyes, not our own. God will see the inequality. God will see the wastage of resources. God will see the greed and the selfishness of those who 'have', disadvantaging those who 'have not'.
- And if we look at the world through God's eyes, it perhaps challenges us to consider whether we are nearer the more privileged or the less privileged in the division of the world's resources.
- Because if we are the former and we are relying on God to act, then might we be the ones who are going to be most affected because we have so much more to lose. So much of our lifestyle is relying on human ingenuity and manufacture rather than natural resources. I'm sure that if we are going to survive the climate crisis with any form of stability and self-respect we are going to have simplify our lifestyles sooner rather than later.
- *'When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed'*. Don't panic but do look at the signs of the times and get yourself ready for when society is going to start to disintegrate as temperature rises, refugees increase, and extreme weather really begin to bite. That is surely the way to honour the memory of the sacrifice made by those who died in World Wars. To work for a more stable and peaceful and just society today.
- What did the disciples do, when Jesus dashed their national pride by saying the temple would be destroyed? We hear in the very next verses, *'When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, 'Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?'* They turned to Christ and listened to him. That smacks of wisdom to me, from a Christian perspective. They kept Jesus rather than National identity or personal protection, at the forefront of their lives.
- So from Mark we learn that to be wise, it's sensible to rely on God rather than our own strength, it's sensible to keep our eyes open and look at the world, but not to be anxious or to panic at the terrible things that are happening, and it's sensible to keep Jesus at the forefront of our lives.
- There's one other thing we can pick up from our first reading in Daniel, before we conclude. Daniel is written in extraordinary picture language in a time of deep turmoil in Jewish history. It doesn't pull punches. It says the future is going to be painful. But it assures us that God will save his people. Listen to the first two verses. *'At that time Michael, (that's the Archangel Michael) the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise There shall be a time of anguish, (the future is not pleasant) such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered (God will save his people)*
- Again, from a Christian perspective, there's something about the cross and resurrection here. The victory of the cross finally winning out as good triumphs over evil and love over hate.
- There's pain. And there's sacrifice. ...
- ... And there's rising from the dead. Listen. *'Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.'*
- So if you want a comfortable life, then hoard your wealth. For heaven's sake, don't share it, because you'll need it when the climate crisis inevitably bites deeply. With luck you might even survive to a well-heeled old age. But what about your children? And will you be remembered with *'shame and everlasting contempt'* as you refuse to share with the beggar at your gate, the refugee on your border or the starving peasant in Eritrea?
- If on the other hand, you'd rather be wise, then do what it says on the packet, rely on God rather than on your own strength and share what little you have. Keep Christ central and look at the *'wars and rumours of wars'* but don't panic because Jesus is your rock not human ingenuity. And you will be prepared for the struggles when they begin. And if you do this openly then I am convinced you will *'shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.'* For you will have discovered true Christian wisdom.