



**New York City, USA.**

*Psalm 1, James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a, Mark 9:30-37*

Vision matters. Long term aims are essential. Yet in leadership, they are the easier bit.

A president or prime-minister wishes to be re-elected, and lead their country to historic successes, to have a name in history.

A chief executive wants their company to be known for innovation, humanity and impact, as well as making very good money themselves.

We can all dream and have big visions. They are essential. The question of what I shall DO, NOW is infinitely more difficult. Because that begins to turn dreams into reality or failure.

The celestial city of our great dreams is far away and the land between us and them is full of valleys and marshes, of dangers for the unwary, and temptations for the susceptible. The genius of Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress is that it deals at the same time with the great vision and the immediate steps.

True wisdom leads us step by step, not forgetting the eventual destination, but knowing that it is not ours or mine to command, nor promised in our lifetimes, nor perhaps even the real goal.

In 1974 in what was then Saigon, there was a gathering of churches to set a 10-year vision for the life of the Church in what was then South Vietnam. Among those who were thinking about the vision was Cardinal Van Thuan, who was just an archbishop then.

Three weeks after the fall of the city, as he went out for a coffee one morning, a car drew up next to him, he was bundled into it, and spent the next 14 years in prison.

So much for the great vision. But in that prison, his resilience, his wisdom, his courage, his faithfulness, led not only to many people finding the good news of Jesus Christ and the establishment of a small church in the prison. It also led to his emergence as a man with whom contact drew one closer to God.

Wisdom: "What do I do now?"

There are many good-looking fake wisdoms, like fake Rolex watches, which can fool the unwary buyer.

One fake is the "wisdom is only here" type. James was writing to quarrelsome churches, and to be honest we have not changed much. The church of the time was full of novel ideas and doctrines that interacted with societies in which fixation on honour and shame was the norm.

Honour and shame were demonstrated in wealth, power and even ostentatious generosity to selected clients. How different from our own

world...

Honour and shame are words we use less, but their power remains, often surfacing in questions of identity. To preserve honour, dignity and identity in secular circles requires a demonstration of superiority. Superiority require exclusion, and exclusion requires that our own special approach is the one adopted by all.

In politics that is well understood. Elections are, after all civil war by gentler means. They openly seek superiority and victory – the fruits of power.

In the church we often drift the same way. Though to avoid appearing too unchristian, we usually apply some camouflage paint to our motives to reshape them a little.

With some, the preaching of their own view being the only one – their own wisdom being the only one that is right – is overt, proclaimed, and that becomes sectarian.

Sectarianism gobbles up all that is of purity and loveliness in the disciples of Christ and hardens us. It circles the wagons, keeps the bad folk out. When we are sectarian, then in our sermons, our codes, our liturgy, we aim at the outsider – not to declare the love of Christ, but by bringing them down, to prove our own superiority. We want everyone to look like we do and to buy into our approach.

As so many of you know so well, because Trinity Wall Street is more deeply engaged in the global Church than almost any church around the world, if we are in a global Church to try and prevail in our view and our wisdom, we end up denying the extraordinary cultural diversity and dynamic of God's creation both of world and Church.

Earlier this year I was in Fiji. It was a meeting of the Primates of the Anglican Communion in a region we call Oceania. One picture from that meeting is imprinted deeply in my mind: it is of two of the primates – close friends, the Archbishop of Papua New Guinea and the Archbishop of Australia, sitting next to each other, chatting about the pressures on them.

Archbishop Frier of Australia was speaking of secularism and the power of materialism, and how a Church continues to flourish in circles of wealth and poverty.

The Archbishop of Papua New Guinea was speaking of the death threats he receives daily because of his campaign against the burning of those women who are accused of witchcraft.

Just think. They are sitting next to each other, and yet what they are dealing with is so different. But yet, in whose service they are dealing with it is so identical.

When we seek to dissolve that diversity in our monolithic views, we are not only culturally imperialistic: we are deeply and profoundly arrogant.

When we are that narrow we quench the Spirit, so that what we hear is only the echo of our own voices.

It is an ancient temptation and is only overcome with the 'wisdom from above', as James calls it, before showing its signs, signs of beauty that we see and recognise in groups and in individuals. Such wisdom distinguishes right and wrong, sin and holiness, and clings to the latter while embracing diversity.

Wisdom from above sees the human being as precious, not their status, denomination, sexuality, gender, ethnicity, background, class, looks, or anything else but the fact that they are human beings.

Its outcome is a harvest of peace, for those who make peace, says James. To be peacemakers leads us to peace in our own lives and our own church, and James goes on to confront his readers with the reasons for the absence of peace: failure to pray.

We try very hard in most of our churches to have good management and good ideas. But the reality is they only matter at the margins.

Cardinal Van Thuan's management skills and imagination mattered not at all as he lay at the bottom of the hold of a boat surrounded by prisoners being taken to prison, as people killed themselves around him out of fear of the future. What price management?

The reality of Jesus is seen in a holy people of prayer, who desire God from the bottom of their hearts. We should value religious communities and monasteries highly because they exist above all as centres of desiring God, and as they do so they infect the whole Church with the same longing. That is the beginning of wisdom. But to move there requires a good foundation in life – and that we find in Psalm 1.

The psalm's wisdom is to direct us in the formation of identity, based either in God to be good and resilient, or in ourselves to be weak and vulnerable.

The search for God-centred wisdom from above, the holy understanding of what to do now, begins with our identity, which is found truthfully in Christ alone.

That will only happen when we are outward-looking. I praise God for Trinity [Wall Street]'s outward-lookingness. For its willingness to look into the world and to seek to serve.

Christ called his disciples to "go". As we know that has been followed by all the greatest exponents of the spiritual life. But to go we must listen.

Benedict in his rule starts by saying "My child, listen..." Ignatius in his exercises seeks to enable a self-understanding, to permit us to know where we are, what has renewed us, what has guided us, what has debased us.

St Francis calls for a simplicity of life in each person, and the Church collectively, that removes those things that distract us from God so that we may hear Jesus and go and meet him in the poor.

At Lambeth Palace in 2014 we started a small religious community based around the spirituality of these three giant figures. Working with a Roman Catholic order, Chemin Neuf, we opened the doors to about 15 resident members for 10 months at a time, and up to 20 non-residents who would come part time. We are just starting our fourth cohort.

They are young, 20-35, of many cultures, nationalities and churches. They bring all the difficulties of culture clash and different understandings. They live simply: sharing a room, early rising, hours of silent prayer, and the Anglican daily services in the chapel.

They have silent retreats in the Ignatian tradition, they work, study and pray like Benedictines, saying the Psalms in great chunks, and they go out to serve with the poor, like the Franciscans. And social media is rationed severely, as are romantic relationships. For millennials I sometimes wonder if the former is not tougher than the latter.

The aim is simplicity, and through simplicity to develop a hunger, a desire for God – as St Gregory called it. Having faced each other, themselves and God, and found they are loved and that the Church is broader and more wonderful than any of us could imagine, then its members are able to live in God's wisdom from above. The aim is for them to infect the church. They have infected and changed us.

Where do we start in ourselves? As usual it is Jesus who gives us the key.

I am sure you know as well as I do that Jesus puts a child in the midst not for the “ahhh” factor. Children of less than 7 counted for little in that society. The child is there because it is dependant on the wisdom of others. Jesus is rebuking his ambitious, wisdom-from-below, narcissistic disciples by calling them to dependence on God alone; and we will do well to listen.

Amidst our many global crises, what will the next six months, let alone years bring? It may be good or terrible. People speak of crises coming, of cyber wars as a reality, of terrorism renewed, about which you here know more than most in the west. We know for certain that climate change is a reality that will utterly change the lives of billions, including our own.

In the Church there will be difficulties and troubles, because we are human beings and sinners.

But we cannot predict the details, because we do not know. Even the best minds do not know what is going to happen in the future. But we know that those with wisdom will flourish. They will be like the tree of Psalm 1, the community of which James speaks, the disciples who Jesus taught, who faced disaster and saw the risen Lord, who said farewell and served in the most beautiful of human communities.

No survivalists they, obsessed with keeping themselves going and others out. No triumphalists, judging a failing world. Peacemakers, sufferers,

those who die, perhaps – yet acting wisely, and living beautifully, with their feet on the ground of this world, and their hearts and hopes in the heaven which is opening before them.

Such a wise Church will be resilient in a hard world and spread resilience. It will know when to speak, when to be silent, how to act and what to do next.

Such a Church will of course have great vision, but also wisdom from above. So to return to Bunyan and the Pilgrim's Progress, even in the slough of despond, or the Hill of Difficulty, facing Apollyon or the Giant Despair, such a wise Pilgrim church will be courageous, act rightly in the moment and live in holiness on its journey, by the grace of God, to the Celestial City. Amen.

10 min read

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