

Eye of the Heart Enlightened

Service for the Opening of Parliament: 6 February 2023

Sarah Bachelard

Texts: Proverbs 8.1-4, 8-11; Psalm 24. 1-5; Matthew 5. 1-10

Every week in religious communities around Australia, prayers are offered for those charged with leadership and the government of peoples. ‘Give wisdom to those who have responsibility and authority in every land’, so the Anglican version goes, ‘that we may share with justice the resources of the earth, and work together in trust’. It’s a theme as old as human community. The recognition that nurturing just and life-giving relationships between peoples, negotiating competing desires and interests in a world of gift and limit, while caring for the very conditions of existence, is no straightforward matter. To those of you who commit to this service, these difficult responsibilities, on behalf of us all – thank you. For as I’m sure I don’t need to tell you, real leadership in the face of this complexity is demanding. It involves many elements – good intentions, good information, the willingness to nurture relationships and build consensus, and sheer hard work. There’s something else needed too, as the prayer I cited above suggests. Something absolutely vital. We call it wisdom.

Wisdom is the quality of those we relate to as elders, of those who speak with authority, whether or not they have positional power. It has to do with judgement, discernment, seeing a bigger picture. Of course, like every human quality – wisdom can be corrupted or reduced by self-interest. Guile and cunning are its debased expressions. True wisdom, though, is different. The wise perceive and connect to the depth dimension of reality and so enable creative, compassionate engagement with the fuller truth of things. Wisdom is a form of what the great Australian poet, Les Murray, called ‘whole-thinking’.¹ As one contemplative teacher has put it, ‘wisdom is not knowing more things. It’s knowing with more of ourselves’.²

¹ From his poem, ‘Poetry and Religion’ in Les Murray, *Selected Poems* (Melbourne: Black Inc, 2007), p.94.

² Cynthia Bourgeault, <https://www.cynthiabourgeault.org>

For the wisdom traditions of the world this capacity for ‘whole thinking’, fuller knowing, is connected to the ‘heart’ – where ‘heart’ refers not to feelings alone, but to the centre or soul of a person. Wisdom is an integrated, attentive, compassionate responsiveness. It embodies what Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr, former Senior Australian of the year, calls ‘*dadirri*’ – ‘inner deep listening and quiet still awareness’.³

‘Give wisdom to those in authority’. But where does wisdom come from? How does any of us grow in it, amidst the messy, busy and often overwhelming circumstances of politics, work and life?

Strangely enough, experience teaches that our access to this integrated, heart’s knowing is usually by way of the heart’s breaking. And maybe you know this for yourself. A time, perhaps, when a disappointment, failure, betrayal or profound grief threw you out of the life you’d known and had tried to fashion for yourself. A time when your ways of making sense faltered, and you found yourself unable to go on as before. Almost none of us undergoes heart-break willingly. Yet the great paradox is that if we can abide in this broken space without closing ourselves off by becoming bitter or repressed, we wake up at a different level. As the grip of our egoic illusions and fantasies of control loosens, we discover ourselves rooted in deeper ground. And gradually, we come to know ourselves more fully part of an interconnected, interdependent whole, capable of being responsible to the whole. Which is the beginning of wisdom.

This has nothing to do with valorising suffering or deprivation; licensing a society to neglect the vulnerable and dispossessed, or to fail to redress injustice. It’s simply the recognition that we don’t attain to ‘whole-thinking’ by cleverness, but through the integration of our wounds. We cannot acquire wisdom as a possession – it grows within us as we are opened at the level of the heart. This is what Jesus means by poverty of spirit. And as he says in the text we heard read, it’s the poor in spirit ... those who have touched the tears of things ... those who walk humbly on the

³ Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr, ‘Dadirri: Inner Deep Listening and Quiet Still Awareness’, <https://www.miriamrosefoundation.org.au/dadirri/>, © 1988 Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr.

earth ... who are blessed. For they are connected to the fullness of life and so are capable of truthful vision, of mercy and of making peace.

And this speaks directly to a matter which you, Prime Minister, have identified as central to the work of this current Parliament. Our nation has received the great gift of a Statement from the Heart of the first peoples of this land. This is a wisdom text. Born of heartbreak – of long and continuing suffering, yet marked by an extraordinary generosity of spirit open to the possibility that the wounds of our history might be reconciled for the good of all – the Statement from the Heart can only truly be heard and enacted when those to whom it is addressed make contact with and listen from their own heart. This is its gift and challenge to us all. The call for a First Nations Voice to be enshrined in the Constitution is thus not just another policy proposal, to be debated at the level of strategy and argument. As well as a condition of lasting justice for Australia's first peoples, it's an invitation to our nation as a whole to grow in wisdom's way.

At a time when petty factionalism is tearing at the fabric of national and international communities, and the crises of our age escalate, the necessity for wisdom in the government and among the peoples of the world is urgent. May this Parliament, this nation – all of us – grow in wisdom that we may share with justice the resources of the earth, and work together in trust.