

THE POWER AND WISDOM OF SOLOMON

1 Kings 2:1-12, 3:3-14 Psalm 111, John 6:51-58

Wesley Canberra 10.30am, 16th August 2015 – Gregor Henderson

1. Solomon a legendary figure, hugely famous, much celebrated. One of the most well-known characters in the history of Israel, in the Hebrew Scriptures, in the Old Testament. Jesus even referred to “Solomon in all his glory”. King of Israel from around 970 – 931 BC, that’s nearly 3000 years ago. He is feted by Jews, Christians and Muslims – not only as a king but by Muslims as a very significant prophet. In any list of famous people from 3000 years ago, Solomon would have to be in the top few.

Now, I need some assistance from the congregation – what comes to mind when you think of Solomon?

Receive input and engage in some brief conversation with the congregation.

2. Let me summarise Solomon’s character and achievements and life under four W’s:

- Wisdom
- Wealth
- World Power
- Women.

A. Wisdom

Refer to my children’s talk, discerning who the real mother is, as per 1 Kings 3:16-28
Read 1 Kings 4:29-34

Note that nearly all the Book of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs or Song of Solomon, key writings in the Wisdom Literature of the Bible, are reputed to stem from Solomon. Also a book called Wisdom of Solomon is among the Apocrypha although it was probably not written until probably 700 years after Solomon.

Among the reputed teachings of Solomon therefore are some well-known sayings:

Proverbs 15:1

6:16-19

14:31

20:29 (one of my favourites)

11:22 (acknowledge the sexism – but it is 3000 years old).

No doubt Solomon has always been regarded as a man of wisdom!

B. Wealth

Through the size of his empire and his control of the trade routes between Mesopotamia and Egypt, between Asia Minor and the Arabian Peninsula, Solomon was able to gather great wealth. The Scriptures tell us that his average year’s income was 666 talents of gold (1 Kings 10:14) – and that was just from the tributes he exacted from his neighbours who wanted to stay on his right side. In addition he earned more millions from levying taxes on the trade that passed through the lands he controlled. 666 talents of gold equals around 800,000 ounces = at today’s rates

around A\$1 billion in tribute – a not inconsiderable part-income for each year of his reign.

He also built the Temple, in stone and cedar, with rich ornamentation, including lots and lots of gold – the Holy of Holies or inner sanctuary was adorned with pure gold.

Of course it's not so hard to be wealthy when you don't have to pay wages. The Bible tells us that Solomon forced all the non-Israelites, the indigenous people of the land (the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites) into slavery. When building the Temple he extended the forced labour to include 30,000 of his own Israelite people. And we are told he had 70,000 labourers and 80,000 stonecutters working in the hill-country for the Temple's construction.

Solomon was indeed wealthy.

C. World Power

Unlike his father, King David, Solomon was no great warrior or soldier. David had extended the kingdom of Israel to take in most of modern-day Syria and Jordan, and parts of Lebanon and Iraq. Solomon maintained that empire. No wonder it produced great wealth.

Solomon was a genuine power in the world. He was a builder and a trader, a diplomat and a very successful businessman. As well as the Temple he also built:

- Big defensive walls around Jerusalem
- A royal palace in Jerusalem
- Another palace in Jerusalem for his first wife, the Egyptian princess (unnamed)
- Many fortresses, and stables for horses and sheds for chariots and barracks for the army, enough to house 1400 chariots and 12,000 horsemen (can still see the remains of some of these, for instance at Megiddo)
- A fleet of ships
- And a new port city at Ezion Geber, on the Gulf of Aqaba, enabling access to the Red Sea and the south
- Copper and iron mines, and smelters.

He had trade agreements with Lebanon and Egypt, and possibly with Sheba following the visit of the Queen of Sheba, a kingdom which included Ethiopia.

D. Women

Read 1 Kings 11:1-3a

Maybe some exaggeration again – 700 hundred princesses among his wives! In the Song of Solomon a lesser number of 60 queens and 80 concubines is given – much more realistic?

As far as we know, Solomon had no Israelite wife. And through his caring for his foreign wives Solomon lost favour with God, for he also built sanctuaries for the gods they followed, in the so-called “high places” of Israel. God declared as punishment that Solomon's kingdom would be taken away from his descendants, with only one small part to be retained by his line. And so it was... after Solomon's death the

kingdom ended up dividing into north and south, with ten tribes going into the northern kingdom under Jeroboam and only two tribes remaining around Jerusalem in the southern kingdom, under Solomon's son Rehoboam.

What then can we learn for ourselves from Solomon? Wisdom for sure, although in the end he acted unwisely in relation to God and the future of his people.

I'm more inclined to think that our learning from Solomon relates more to the use of power. There's the famous aphorism stated by Lord Acton in 1887 that "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely". Despite all his fame and glory, Solomon is, sadly, an example of the truth of those words – he was a mixture of good and not-so-good, like most of us. His use of power, in the end, let him and his people, down.

Now, lest we think that the wrongful use of power applies only to people in government or politics or CEOs of big companies, let me remind us that everyone of us has some form of power. Be it in our family relationships, with children or grandchildren; or with work colleagues or friends, among our neighbours, here in our church congregation, even just the power over ourselves. Hardly anyone is without some sort of power or influence or authority in some part of their life.

How should we exercise our power? Surely with humility, as the book of Proverbs would teach us. With empathy towards others rather than apathy or antipathy. With a desire to empower others rather than to take advantage of them. With careful discernment for the truth and for justice, rather than for self-aggrandisement or vanity. With moderation rather than glorification.

In short, as Jesus exercised his power. For the sake of others. In self-giving service. To enhance God's gift of life for yourself and for others.

Solomon will be celebrated by every generation as a ruler wise and rich and powerful – but also flawed. A mixture of the good and the not-so-good, like all of us. We can learn from him, from the positives and the negatives, especially as to how we are to use the power we have in our lives and in our relationships.

To the glory of God, Amen.