**WORDS OF WISDOM FOR THE AGE OF PANDEMIC**

***St Bonaventure and Pope Francis***

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We will always remember the year 2020 as the year of the Great Pandemic. I was living in London when the pandemic hit Britain back in late February, early March. Looking back, March and April were rather worrying months to be living in London, with the death toll in the City often numbering hundreds each day and the normally busy streets of a huge and vibrant city eerily quiet and deserted. As the weeks passed, it became evident that we were in this for the long haul, which appears to still be the case as I write this. But apart from being very careful to take all the necessary safety precautions, it also became necessary to look after the inner self, with so many of my normal activities and social engagements no longer possible. A prayer I often prayed was a prayer for the gift of wisdom, the gift to be able to discern amid all that was going on around me what would be the most wholesome way in which I should live my life.

Perhaps two of our worst enemies in dealing with living through a pandemic are fear and ignorance. Fear can crush our human spirit; ignorance can lead us into bad ways of living and acting. Both are life destroying, rather than life giving. I find inspiration in the words of St Francis in the 27th Admonition, “Where there is charity and wisdom, there is neither fear nor ignorance.”

That great disciple of St Francis, St Bonaventure, prized wisdom as foundational in the spiritual life, that is, in coming to live a way of life that will enable us to flourish as human beings who are created to be the image of God. Bonaventure was a great theologian. He was, however, never concerned with theology as purely theoretical knowledge. It was far more concerned with opening a vision of a way of life. His theology could be called wisdom theology – wisdom lay at its heart and was its purpose.

In discussing the nature and purpose of theology, Bonaventure ask whether theology is purely speculative knowledge or whether it is some form of practical knowledge as well. We see his response to this question in his *Commentary on the Sentences,* written while he was still studying at the University of Paris

The knowledge presented in this book is of this sort. For this knowledge helps faith, and faith is related to the intellect in such a way that, great as the intellect is, its nature is to move our desire, especially our desire to love. And this is clear. For the intellectual knowledge that tells us that Christ has died for us and similar things, moves a person to love. Therefore, it must be conceded that we do theology so that we may become good people. (*Commentary on the Sentences q.3)*

This is the nature of wisdom theology and the purpose of the gift of wisdom, to make us good people.

In one of his Sermons, Bonaventure comments on the dimensions of wisdom:

There are some dimensions of wisdom that relate to the way we think, others that relate to what we feel and desire, and others that are to be lived out in our actions. Therefore, wisdom ought to take possession of the entire person. (*Sermon II on the Kingdom of God*)

Wisdom will enable us to integrate the many levels of reality into a unified vision of the world and multiple levels of our human experience into a unified sense of our spiritual journey. The goal of the journey is not to become someone who knows a lot of things; it is, above all, to become a lover. Wisdom enables us to truly love, which is our purpose, our destiny, in becoming the image of God who is Love. This, basically, is what life is all about.

St Bonaventure develops his reflections on wisdom in a series of talks he gave in 1268, *Collations on the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit.*  He delivered these conferences during Lent of that year to an audience drawn from the members of the university community at Paris which would have included the young friars who were there at that time. In the Ninth Conference, he focuses on *The Gift of Wisdom.*

I wish to explore something of what Bonaventure has to say in the Conference and to draw some comparisons between this and the more recent reflections on Wisdom given by Pope Francis, asking what insights can be found for the development of our own spiritual lives.

Both St Bonaventure and Pope Francis ground their teaching on Wisdom in the Scriptures, in other words, in what is revealed to us by God. St Bonaventure writes,

Wisdom is a gift of God. But if you want to have it, you must have a desire for it, since wisdom does not come to one who is not possessed by a strong desire for it. But it is not denied to one who desires to have it. *(Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit* 9.1)

Pope Francis comments in his teachings on the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit,

The first gift of the Holy Spirit is wisdom. But it is not simply human wisdom, which is the fruit of knowledge and experience. In the Bible we are told that Solomon, at the time of his coronation as King of Israel, had asked for the gift of wisdom (cf. 1 Kings 3:9). And wisdom is precisely this: it is the grace of being able *to see everything with the eyes of God*. It is simply this: it is to see the world, to see situations, circumstances, problems, everything through God’s eyes. This is wisdom. Sometimes we see things according to our liking or according to the condition of our heart, with love or with hate, with envy.... No, this is not God’s perspective. Wisdom is what the Holy Spirit works in us to enable us to see things with the eyes of God. (Pope Francis, 9 April 2014)

Returning to those words of Pope Francis, ‘wisdom enables us to see with the eyes of God’, what does it mean in practice to see everything with the eyes of God? How can we be sure that we are not deceiving ourselves in this? Bonaventure quotes from the Letter of James, which speaks about the qualities of life that should be evident in the life of the wise person.

When wisdom does not dwell within us, the fault is not that of wisdom. Rather, it is our fault. If we wish to have the light of wisdom within us, then we must show the qualities of wisdom. Should I make these up out of my own head? In no way. Sacred Scripture explains them clearly enough and St James describes the qualities of the wisdom that comes from God. (*op. cit.* 9.8)

We find in James 3.17:

The wisdom from above is chaste, peaceable, gentle, considerate, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

So, let’s explore these qualities of wisdom:

To be chaste. This is not to be identified with taking a vow of chastity, though this can indeed be a way of living chastely. But to be chaste has a deeper meaning. St Bonaventure says one is unchaste when one is subject to sin.

The source of all sin is pride and to live an unchaste life is to live in such a way that life is centred on self and the good of self rather than being centred on the other. This is the opposite of Christian love. In Christian love, to love another is to go out of myself to seek the good of the other. It does not mean that I must need to like the other. But in Christian love no matter what my natural feelings may be towards another person, I must seek what is for their good, not what is for my good. This is what it means to look upon another person as God looks upon them, to look upon another with the eyes of God. Pride is the opposite of this.

Pope Francis captures this quality of being chaste in an address he gave to a gathering of young people in Turin, 21 June 2015:

Love is very respectful of people. It does not use people. Namely, love is chaste. And to you all, young people, in this hedonistic world, where there are only commercials, pleasure… I tell you: Be chaste! Be chaste! It is right to try for a genuine love, that knows to give life, that does not search to use the other for its own pleasure. A love that makes sacred the life of the other person: ‘I respect you; I do not want to use you.’ It is not easy. But I ask you, Make the effort to live love chastely. (Address to young people in Turin, 21 June 2015)

St Bonaventure associates being peaceable with the quality of patience.

One who is patient is governed by much wisdom. One who is impatient upsets this peace and destroys the house of wisdom. *(op. cit.* 9.11)

Pope Francis likewise associates the peaceful attitude with patience and speaks of us needing to acquire something of the patience of God.

This is what holiness is. It is what God asked of Abraham: walk in my presence and be blameless in my sight. It is a matter of “coming under the influence and movement of God’s Spirit and of this wisdom. And we can say that the man and woman who journey thus are wise, for they move docilely *under the motion of the patience of God*. But we can find ourselves confronted by another spirit, which is opposed to the spirit of God: the spirit of curiosity. It leads us to want to become masters of God’s plans, of the future, of things, to know everything, to seize hold of everything. (14 November 2013)

God is patient with us when he looks upon us, even in our failures, our sins. We are called to look upon others with the eyes of God, the eyes of patience. I have the quality of patience, says the Pope, when I recognize that other people have a right to live in this world, just as they are. Patience calls for a deep compassion whereby I try to accept the other person as he or she is.

Patience takes root when I recognize that other people also have a right to live in this world, just as they are. It does not matter if they hold me back, if they unsettle my plans, or annoy me by the way they act or think, or if they are not everything that I want them to be. Love always has an aspect of deep compassion that leads to accepting the other person as part of this world, even when he or she acts differently from how I would like. (*Amoris Laetitia* 92)

When we come to the quality of gentleness, Bonaventure speaks particularly of being gentle in our speech.

Above all, gentleness in speech is required. Evil speech kills both the speaker and the listener. You cannot speak detraction about your neighbour without killing yourself with the same sword. Speech is also an instrument for expressing wisdom and therefore it ought to be used in accord with the rule of wisdom. (*(op. cit.* 9.12)

Our words should not be used simply to attract attention. To use speech in accord with the rule of wisdom is to respect the stillness and silence of the gentle breeze. As Pope Francis says,

Jesus says that the kingdom of God does not come in a way that attracts attention; rather, it comes through wisdom. God spoke to the prophet Elijah neither in the strong wind nor in the earthquake nor in the fire, but rather in a still soft breeze. The breeze was the whisper of wisdom. (14 November 2013)

The wisdom of true love, says the Pope, will teach us how to listen, to speak, and at certain times, to keep quiet. (*Amoris Laetitia* 99) I like a painting in London’s National Gallery by Salvator Rosa, 1615-1673, entitled *Philosophy.* Itdepicts a philosopher with a stern expression scrutinising the viewer, with a Latin inscription on a stone tablet that he is holding: ‘Be silent, unless what you have to say is better than silence’. That might be a good thought for a community get together!

Bonaventure associates the next quality of wisdom, being considerate, with the attitude of kindness. Kindness means to be attracted towards what is good. Kindness is the opposite of meanness,

No one is attracted by the good unless he is a kind person. A mean person gives in to evil. Kindness brings about a high desire for good things and it brings one to love them and to consent to them. (*(op. cit.* 9.13)

Pope Francis likewise associates kindness with the desire for the good. In his commentary on the words ‘Love is kind’ from 1 Cor 13, he writes

The Greek word *chrestos* indicates that love benefits and helps others. For this reason, it is translated as “kind”. Love is more than a mere feeling. Rather, it should be understood along the lines of the Hebrew verb “to love”; it is “to do good”. *(Amoris Laetitia* 93,94)

Love is more than a mere feeling. It means to do good for others. It is not the type of love shown by Linus in the Peanuts cartoon, ‘I love humanity, it’s just people I can’t stand.’

Mercy producing good – this is the next quality of wisdom. Bonaventure associates mercy with generosity in our actions:

Wisdom wants to have mercy not only in how we feel but in what we do. Mercy and good fruits are generosity in action. (*Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit* 14)

It is interesting to note that in speaking of the poverty of St Francis, a man whose conversion was initiated by his experience of mercy through his encounter with lepers, Bonaventure describes this poverty as a life of magnificent generosity.

Mercy lies at the heart of the teaching of Pope Francis. His personal motto, *Miserando atque Eligendo* is taken from a homily of St Bede the Venerable on the calling of St Matthew by Jesus , ‘Because he saw him through the eyes of mercy and chose him.’ In his address to Brazil’s cardinals and bishops on 27 July 2013, he addressed them with the words,

We need a Church capable of rediscovering the maternal womb of mercy. Without mercy we have little chance nowadays of becoming part of a world of wounded persons in need of understanding, forgiveness, and love.

The Church, he constantly insists, is called to be a missionary community that has ‘an endless desire to show mercy, the fruit of its own experience of the Father’s infinite mercy.’ (*Evangelii Gaudium* 24) Mercy is the greatest of all the virtues and Pope Francis, quoting Thomas Aquinas, associates it with the greatest exercise of power – ‘through mercy God’s omnipotence is manifested to the highest degree.’ (*ibid.* 37) The expression of power and authority ought not be power understood as domination or control over others but power as the practice of mercy.

Finally, wisdom is impartial in its judgements and is sincere. In our age of twitter and 24-hour media coverage, people can be judged and condemned instantly – and often we find out later that such judgements are not warranted. All of us can be too quick to judge based on stories or rumours. We might take to heart the words of Bonaventure:

If I must judge about another, it would be better for me to think good of that person rather than evil. A person should be more inclined to excuse kindly than to accuse wrongly. At the present time, all people are judges with evil thoughts. A person should not judge rashly without correct zeal and clear knowledge. Matthew 7:1 commands: ‘Judge not that you may not be judged’. It is the highest form of foolishness when people judge the personal faults of others and overlook themselves. Gregory the Great says: “The more curious a mind is to pry into the affairs of others, the more foolish it is in knowing its own affairs. (*Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit* 16)

And Pope Francis:

Look in the mirror to look at yourself as you are. ‘Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye and do not notice the log that is in your own eye?’   Judgment belongs only to God, to Him alone.  It is for us to love, to understand, to pray for others when we see things that are not good. Talk kindly to others so that they may learn from their mistakes:  But never judge. Never. (20 June 2016)

St Bonaventure and Pope Francis provide us with much to reflect upon. Wisdom is one of the most beautiful gifts from God and our wounded world needs people who possess such wisdom. I might pray that one of the positive results of going through this pandemic will be that in some way I too can grow in my understanding and practice of the way of wisdom.