**Sermon Christmas 2C**

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**Text:** *“Give your servant therefore an understanding mind…” (1 Kings 3:4-15)*

In the year 2012, my brother played for the World Juniors in football. He and his team represented Canada in the place of the tournament, “the Mecca of international football,” Austin, Texas. Before going into each match, my brother would hear his coach knock into the players: “It does not matter what the scoreboard says. The score is always 0-0.” (That is to say: don’t play like you’re ahead or behind; focus on playing well.) As a sports fan, one of my biggest turnoffs is watching a team set aside good sportsmanship, playing sloppily or cockily, believing that victory is guaranteed – or at least owed them – at any cost. Sadly, in life as in sports, the referees don’t always make the right calls. Wise conduct is set aside. We are tempted either to become discouraged from past failings or to prop ourselves up with the credit for things that seem to be going well. The reality is, though, that every day in our baptismal life is a God-given opportunity for a fresh start.

King Solomon had exercised co-regency under his father David; but after his death, Solomon was to embark on a fresh start as the sole ruler of Israel. Here in our Old Testament lesson Solomon humbly acknowledges the Lord had “made your servant king in place of David my father, although I am but a little child. I do not know how to go out or come in. And your servant is in the midst of your people whom you have chosen, a great people…” (1 Ki 3:7-8) God had indeed shown great steadfast love to David, a man after His own heart. Now it is for Solomon to continue walking in the ways of the Lord or to set his own values and priorities. When God invites the new king to “Ask what I shall give you,” Solomon asks for “an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil” (v. 9). With the whole world before him, Solomon knew the most important thing is an “understanding mind”. A *lev shome‘* – literally, “a heart that listens”.

True wisdom comes from listening, not to our own heart, but to God’s Word. “For the Lord gives wisdom;” it says in Proverbs, “from his mouth come knowledge and understanding; he stores up sound wisdom for the upright; he is a shield to those who walk in integrity, guarding the paths of justice and watching over the way of his saints.” (Pr 2:6-8) Divine wisdom, able to discern what is right and what is wrong, is connected to conducting ourselves well. And no matter what our past achievements, failures, or losses, a special day is given – a day which is called “today” – to hearken again to God’s voice (Heb 4:7). Yet the daily call to realignment with His commandments through repentance and contrition proves no simple task. We are prone to distraction as our weak and sinful nature does not naturally lean on God; it is not readily attentive to His Word.

Solomon was off to a good start – though, admittedly, not a great one. Here we see him sacrificing, not where his father had placed the ark of the covenant on Mount Zion in Jerusalem, but at Gibeon according to his own custom (1 Ki 3:4). Later in his reign, even after constructing the Temple, Solomon let stand all these illicit altars and “high places”. This proved to be his downfall along with his marriage to foreign wives and worship of strange gods. Again, owing to our sinful nature, we can easily understand what led the king off the straight and narrow path. Leadership is all about giving the people what they want: in this case letting them keep their precious places of worship. It is all about keeping peace with neighbours, even at the expense of personal integrity. Right? Wrong. In this way Solomon doomed his kingdom and even shortened his own life (v. 14).

So, too, the focus for many of us is not on God’s priorities, God’s values, God’s agendas, but our own. The only corrective to this sinful attitude is God’s Word. Like Solomon at the start of his reign, every day we should wake to our baptismal life using the sign of the cross, the Apostles’ Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer. These are reminders of who we are and what we are to ask for. And, also like Solomon, we have before us a kingdom as we pray the Third Petition: “Your kingdom come”. What does this mean? “We pray in this petition that our heavenly Father would send us His holy Spirit, so that by His grace we believe His holy Word and lead godly lives here in time and there in eternity.” Bl. Dr. Martin Luther further explains in the Large Catechism:

God’s kingdom comes to us in two ways: first, it comes here, in time, through the Word and faith, and secondly, in eternity, it comes through the final revelation. Now, we pray for both of these, that it may come to those who are not yet in it, and that it may come by daily growth here and in eternal life hereafter to us who have attained it. All this is simply to say: “Dear Father, we pray Thee, give us thy Word, that the Gospel may be sincerely preached throughout the world and that it may be received by faith and may work and live in us” (LC III 53-54)

From the world’s vantage point, God’s Word which establishes His kingdom is (at best) the least practical thing for which to pray. Given the prospects that face us each day, week, month, and year, both those we can see coming from a mile away and those which take us by surprise, the temptation is there to either despair or carnal security. Both are the result of undue self-reliance. Against such attitudes, St. James admonishes the Church, “Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and make a profit’ – yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring … Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will do this or that.’ As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.” (Jas 4:13-16) The score is always 0-0 no matter whether you see yourself as being ahead or behind in the game of life. Scripture alone evaluates us.

And when it does, we see that we do not possess a clean slate. Mistakes have been made in our community and in our individual lives. We daily sin much and deserve nothing but punishment in God’s holy court. Yet this is cause for rejoicing once we realize, by illumination of the Holy Spirit, that ours is not the final word. God the Father alone possesses the all-creative Word: His beloved Son, Christ Jesus. In Jesus’ perfect person “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of the cross.” (Col 1:20) Everlasting blessings are secured. A heavenly kingdom. Therefore, St. Paul reminds the baptized community to “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” (3:2-3)

Because of Jesus, the everlasting King, our prayer petitions are pleasing to our Father in heaven. How, then, do we focus on living well rather than living for the moment? “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting…” (Jas 1:5-6) And Luther, echoing James, encourages the Church that “we must strengthen ourselves against unbelief and let the kingdom of God be the first thing for which we pray. Then, surely, we shall have all the other things in abundance, as Christ teaches, ‘Seek first the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be yours as well.’” (LC III 58) So today, let us move forward in the fresh start He has given us by dying to sin and rising to new life imparted through the Word of God – preached, printed, and incarnate in our Lord Jesus Christ. To Him be “Honor, glory, and dominion, And eternal victory Evermore and evermore.”