

Who is wise and understanding among you? *James 3:13*

As I remarked earlier in the year, one of the privileges of my job over the last since I was ordained back in 1978, serving in Parishes in both an urban and rural environment, North and South is to meet and to get to know the rich variety of people who worship in our Parish Churches. As you can imagine, over the years I have had many a cause to pause and think of some of the people it has been my privilege to work among. In so many ways their ministry to me has enriched my own life and faith. Most, if not all, would be surprised to hear me speak in such terms about them.

As I read that opening verse of that letter from James that we heard this morning my mind went back to a lady called Lilly Leggett. Lilly lived in a Housing Executive house in Ahoghill and had worked initially in the linen factory in Ballymena and latterly in Gallaher's Cigarette factory. She was one of the carers of this world. Lilly never married and she looked after her parents to the end. She was a wonderful babysitter and surrogate grand mother to our children.

When you first met Lilly she would have come across as something of an eccentric and you would be forgiven for thinking that she wasn't really following what you were talking about. I soon came to recognise the depths there were to this lovely lady. I remember visiting her niece one afternoon and she began talking of Lilly with great affection. Then she said, 'You know Mr Brew, Lilly is very wise – not everyone realises that.' I knew exactly what she meant. She had a wonderful insight into people who were hurting. I remember

when some of the very contentious issues were coming up at the start of the peace process, sitting in her kitchen as she recalled some of the things Terence O’Neill had been trying to do before he was driven out of office. I saw what Anne meant, ‘You know, Mr Brew, Lilly is very wise.’

As I say, Lilly came to my mind as I read those words from the Letter of James. ‘Who is wise and understanding among you?’ It set me thinking, what is the difference between wisdom and knowledge. We can accumulate a list of facts and call it knowledge, but wisdom is something very different. Wisdom has more to do with what we do with whatever knowledge we may have.

The wisdom that the writer of this letter is talking about is going even further than that. It is more than just a matter of attitude, it is more about a new way of thinking, a different set of values, a new way of living that we are called to embrace in our discipleship. At various points in the New Testament, a sharp distinction is drawn between the wisdom of this world and the wisdom of God. So, Paul, in writing to the Corinthians, asks:

²⁰ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. *1 Cor 1:20-21*

and further on

¹⁸ Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. ¹⁹ For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. *1 Cor 3:18,19*

This was a very hierarchical world. It is in the context of hierarchies that we look at our Gospel reading for today.

³³Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the way?’ ³⁴But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. *Mark 9:33-34*

Set in the wider context of Jesus’ teaching on self giving and his own coming rejection and death, they confess they had been talking of their relative status. These men who were following Jesus were ordinary fallible human beings. Like ourselves they were products of the society into which they had been born and in which they grew up; their attitudes, their way of thinking moulded by that environment. As I say, it was very much a hierarchical society. In hierarchies it is important to establish where you stand. When we move into new situations it is natural to carry over the attitudes and priorities with which we are familiar. And so as they settle in to this new kind of living to which Jesus has called them, they bring some of the baggage of their old way of life – who is on the top of the heap, who is on the bottom. So Jesus sets them down

³⁵ He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." ³⁶ Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." *Mark 9:35-37*

To follow Jesus is to follow one who looks at the world differently and calls his followers to do the same. He is one who reached out and touched the leper, who allowed a woman to wash his feet with her tears and wipe them with her hair; who taught his followers to turn the other cheek, to walk the second mile, to give away the coat.

Of course in this horribly practical world it doesn’t make sense. It makes sense to close our borders, it makes sense to look after our own. Where does it all

stop? And yet in the news bulletins and in our newspapers - the pictures, the scenes - speak to our humanity, as ones made in God's image. In a very real sense Christ is there; in those who are suffering; in those who are trying to make sense of it all; in those, in all the constraints placed upon them, are seeking to do what is right and what is just.

‘Who is wise and understanding among you?’ I often think back on Lilly Leggett. I sensed in her and in many like her a wisdom that you do not find in books, a wisdom that had its roots in a warm humanity and a simple uncomplicated faith in the God she served in word and deed. I often left her door, as I have left many before and since all the richer for the time I spent in their presence.