

Ripeness Is Everything: Wise Discipleship

This is not an era for dumb disciples or witless Christians. Human beings are crying out for intelligence and wisdom. Certainly our world needs Christians who reach out in love to the poor, sharing material possessions in lives of love. But it also needs Christians who lovingly share their intellectual gifts, their treasures of wisdom. Western culture suffers intellectual malnutrition. It needs to supplement its diet with intelligent Christianity.

With our intelligence we seek to know the truth about things. Wisdom takes intelligence a step further, for wisdom is not book knowledge, but practical knowledge. Wisdom integrates knowledge into decision making and behavior. In order to attain wisdom, our lives need to focus on the good.

Intelligence and Wisdom, Readiness and Ripeness

In *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, William Shakespeare puts the words “readiness” and “ripeness” into the mouths of



characters faced with death. Hamlet says “The readiness is all” (Act V, Sc. II). In *Lear*, Edgar says, “Ripeness is all” (Act V, Sc. II). *Readiness* tends to be something active, something we produce through our own efforts. *Ripeness* is something organic, something that occurs according to its own rhythm, independently of our efforts. Unlike Shakespeare, I prefer to apply these phrases to life rather than death. I see readiness as our contribution to discipleship through our intellects. Ripeness (maturation) is that wonderful moment when the fruit (peach or plum) is at its best, giving what it has received, even at the risk of falling. In the First Letter of Peter, a couple of verses deal explicitly with the spiritual ripeness and intellectual readiness of disciples. These verses are addressed to all Christians, including those facing opposition and ridicule. Peter warns that persecution is a real possibility: “Do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled, but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always ready to give an answer to anyone who asks you the reason or your hope, yet with gentleness and reverence” (1 P 3:14-15).

I see ripeness as related to spirituality and readiness as related to study. In order not to be intimidated by any sort of persecution, we need to “sanctify Christ,” revering him and acknowledging him as Lord of our lives. The spiritual is not simply first chronologically, but also first in importance. We must give God priority in our hearts. First comes communion with God and then communication with others. Indeed if we put God first, our lives will inevitably provoke questions from others. They will notice something different about us, and they will inquire about it. Peter seems to imply study. He says we must be ready to *give an answer*. In order to give an answer, we need to know the answer first. There is no way around the hard work of wrestling with texts and grappling with ideas. It is an answer about the *hope* in

our hearts, our trust that things will work out despite the difficulties, our conviction that there is more to life than our limited temporal existence—although we do not yet see what we hope for, we know it is possible and attainable. The source of Christian hope is the goodness and love of God. Because of God’s faithful love, we know that the future is full of promise.

Peter says we need to explain our faith “to anyone who asks.” Different kinds of people will have different kinds of questions. Obviously those who are sympathetic to the hope in our hearts will be easier to answer. But it takes much more careful preparation to know what to say to skeptics and those downright hostile to our worldview. Peter does tell us *how* to answer: with gentleness and reverence. We are to present the truth in love. We do this, not to win arguments, but to win people. The strength of our convictions is to be communicated with tact and respect.

Readiness and ripeness are vital, but ripeness has priority. Ripeness refers to who we are, to the gift of God that comes through communion with him, to grace. Communion with God gives unity to our intellectual powers. It is not the strength of our arguments that will win people over, but the quality of our lives, of our relationship with Jesus.

We need exemplars. We all benefit from the example of individuals who put their intelligence at the service of humanity, whose actions and deeds match their intellectual ideals, who sacrifice themselves for the ideas that claim their allegiance. Of course, we cannot all be geniuses. It is, however, usually not desirable to imitate a person of genius either. Without a spirituality, genius easily loses its way. Readiness without ripeness is not enough.

Even a genius of goodwill faces particular challenges and hurdles. Persons of extraordinary intelligence are so



used to excelling without effort that they easily forget that this does not apply in daily life. Despite outstanding grades they may fail in the task of living. Another problem that can plague persons of extraordinary intelligence is their very versatility. They may end up dissipating their energies through taking on too many projects. They do not become outstanding intellectuals simply by having a huge number of ideas. They need to direct the energy of their lives. A hyperdeveloped mind allied to an underdeveloped spirit and heart leads to disequilibrium and worse.

The greatest exemplar of a sterling mind integrated in a fully human life of spiritual depth is none other than Jesus. Christians associate Jesus with perfect holiness. Many regard him as the paragon of wisdom, but few automatically associate him with intellectual brilliance. This failure to see Jesus as a genius is understandable inasmuch as he did not become a world-renowned academic or found a university or write a seminal book. He apparently never committed his thoughts to paper, and on the only known occasion he did write (Jn 8:6), it was in sand.

The best way to dispel any doubts about Jesus' extraordinary mind is to read the Gospels attentively. The proof of Jesus' intelligence is especially to be found in his capacity to offer humanity something of universal value and his ability to resolve the fundamental problems of human existence.¹ But it is also manifest in many other ways.

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The Greatest Exemplar

Since he was not only fully human but also fully divine, Jesus had an amazing intellect to start with. Second, whatever form his education took it enhanced his intellectual giftedness and impressed his contemporaries. Luke's brief words about the twelve-year-old Jesus in the temple at

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Jerusalem (Lk 2:42-50) show him listening to the doctors and questioning them. The child intrigues and fascinates these learned men. In fact, he surpasses them. And it is not simply his intellect, formidable though it is, that holds them in thrall. It is the

paradox of such prophetic wisdom on the lips of a mere child. Undoubtedly Jesus' mind found nourishment in his communion with the Father. Perhaps Mary spoke to the child Jesus of her own faith and recited Scripture to him. In other words, he may have had a human teacher as well as a divine teacher.

Jesus did not let his exceptional intellectual gifts lie idle. He cultivated them. According to Luke, he continued to grow in wisdom (Lk 2:52). In other words, he grew in his ability to judge things rightly and to react appropriately. Thus he did not use his intellectual powers to accumulate useless facts or trivia. He saw the world truthfully and acted in accord with what he saw. Jesus' intensive prayer and fasting in the desert and the energy and zeal of his public ministry showed that his intellect was at the service of a noble cause. In order for genius to be productive, it must be impelled forward by guiding passion, by a strong motivating force, by the transformative power of desire. Jesus was pressed forward by a consuming love. It was the drive to announce the Good



News, to preach the reign of God, to free people from the slavery of sin.

We think with our whole being and not just with our intellects. Without physical health and a reasonable level of emotional and moral equanimity, our ability to concentrate properly, understand fully, and judge rightly is impeded. Since Jesus was without sin, his mind did not lose serenity. He never did wrong and never gave way to destructive emotional behavior. Thus his whole being supported the vision of his intellect.

Jesus' way of thinking, as illustrated in the Gospels, displays a brilliant mind at work. Aristotle asserts in his *Poetics* and even more forcefully in his *Rhetoric* that the use of metaphors is a mark of great intelligence, something that cannot be taught: "The most important thing is to be good at metaphor. This is the one thing that cannot be learned from someone else, and is a sign of natural talent; for the successful use of metaphors is a matter of perceiving similarities."²

There is a tendency to think of metaphors as something purely linguistic—a verbal ornamentation that is pretty, but apart from that, pretty ineffective. But a metaphor such as "You are the salt of the earth" (Mt 5:13) is much more than a figure of speech. It challenges our taken-for-granted relationship with things, it uproots and dislocates us from our customary understanding of ourselves. More than that, a metaphor enlarges and deepens our knowledge. We understand ourselves and our relatedness in a new way: "I am the vine and you are the branches" (Jn 15:5). Jesus' metaphors—salt, light, bread, sheep, and so on—take us beyond ourselves, toward transcendence. Even though they are made of sensible and tangible realities, they simultaneously lift us up into the realm of the spirit: "I am the bread of life" (Jn 6:35). Making connections among disparate

realities, Jesus' metaphors put a fragmented world back together.

In John's chapter 15, Jesus speaks of his Father's "house" and of its "many rooms." With the familiarity of these words, Jesus lifts the veil on the afterlife, bringing domesticity into the unlimited horizons of the infinite. While not denying the difference between earthly life and paradise, Jesus shows that there must be echoes and resemblances. Metaphors galvanize the imagination, inviting us to think differently, and even to act in ways that once seemed impossible. They are the best way, and possibly the sole way, of talking about what is new. They give the imagination liberating and productive space.

But even when he is not using metaphors, Jesus helps people in their thinking and action. In the Beatitudes, Jesus proclaims unexpected joys, the kind to be found in the simplicity, tears, gentleness, mercy, purity, peace, and suffering of saints. He helps his hearers think deep thoughts by starting from what they know, from what is familiar to them. In Matthew's chapter 7 he talks of how earthly fathers would not dream of giving a stone to their sons asking for bread, or offering a snake when they ask for fish. After emphasizing this point, Jesus points out that God, being perfect, will be infinitely more likely to answer our requests than human fathers are.

A wise person knows how and when to pose questions. Jesus' questions often invite his hearers to recognize and follow desires they may not have realized they had. The first question Jesus asks in the Gospel of John is: "What do you desire?" (Jn 1:38). And a related question appears four times in the synoptic Gospels: "What do you want me to do for you?" (Mt 20:32, Mk 10:36 and 10:51, Lk 18:41).

Jesus also has a strong logical mind. In Luke 13:10-16, a synagogue ruler becomes indignant when Jesus heals



a woman on the Sabbath. Although she has been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years, the synagogue leader is adamant that this healing should have been done on a working day. Jesus counters by pointing out that nobody has any scruples about untying their ox or donkey on the Sabbath and bringing it out to give it water. The beast has not been thirsty for eighteen years, and the woman, “a daughter of Abraham,” has felt a greater thirst over the course of many Sabbaths.

Jesus sees even a bigger picture than this. The central theme of Jesus’ preaching, the kingdom of God (today one could perhaps say “the dream of God”), is already mysteriously present in all the small-scale events and happenings of our daily lives. Jesus intuitively grasps a grand meaning in the tiny mustard seed becoming a large shrub.

The goal of human intelligence is to know the real, and to know God, the supreme truth. Intelligence tends toward the truth. The intelligence of Jesus is perfectly pitched to this goal, for he constantly proclaims the kingdom of God. His mind is constantly directed toward the revelation or manifestation of God. Although God’s kingdom is already breaking into the present, Jesus sees that its full realization is in the future. When the seventy disciples return from preaching, intoxicated with the success of their venture, Jesus says that what should really give them cause to rejoice is the reality that their names are written in heaven (Lk 10:20).

Jesus adapts his words to the various people he is dealing with. It is not that he changes the content of his

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message, but that he pays attention to his interlocutors, and seeks to speak in a way that makes sense to them. He uses many agrarian images and metaphors because he spends so much time talking to people who live and work on the land. But when he is questioned by the Roman procurator Pilate before his crucifixion, Jesus speaks of authority and truth, issues that concern Pilate.

Jesus is wise enough to know the limits of intelligence. When confronted by the powerful but demonic intelligence of Satan toward the end of his forty-day fast in the desert, Jesus knows that only God's word is strong enough to defeat the Adversary's clever arguments. And so the Word of God quotes from God's word, the Holy Scriptures, and defeats Satan.

Ripening

To become wise and intelligent disciples, we need to imitate Jesus—not external imitation, but conforming our minds and hearts to Jesus. From this interior mirroring, our external words and deeds will naturally reflect Jesus. A few years ago, the WWJD bracelet—"What would Jesus do?"—became a fad. Such a bracelet certainly points people in a helpful direction. But of ourselves we are not always capable of knowing what Jesus would do. The responses are not written on our wrists. The answers are to be found by meditating and pondering on what Jesus did in fact do. We have looked at some examples of his wisdom and intelligence in action. We need to meditate on such examples, pray over them. The full ripeness of Jesus' wisdom needs to be tasted and appreciated with our spiritual senses.

There is a clue to how to do this in the Greek verb *menein*, frequent in John's Gospel and having a range of meanings: to stay, remain, dwell, abide, last, endure, live. This word applies in a special way to John, because



John has great staying power: he stays by Jesus' side, the only one of the twelve present at the cross. It is no accident that John is right next to Jesus at the Last Supper, because John is humanly and spiritually especially close to Jesus. John remains, John abides.

To understand this word “remain” better, it helps to turn to the first chapter of John's Gospel. When Andrew and an unnamed disciple start to follow Jesus, he turns and asks them, “What do you want?” These are the first recorded words of Jesus in John's Gospel, in the form of a question, a question that is interested and inviting, profound and personal. The two disciples answer Jesus with another question. They ask, “Where do you dwell?” This is not just a geographical question but a deeper, more spiritual one. The disciples have just left John the Baptist. They want something lasting, something that endures, a center that can hold.

Different forms of the verb *menein* appear in chapter 15 of John. Jesus is unraveling implications of the vine and the branches. Jesus points out that trying to improve ourselves and be morally perfect is not what is essential. What is essential is to be in a living relationship with God, to dwell with him, to stay with him, to love him. We do not need to worry about bearing fruit: he will take care of our fruitfulness. We surrender ourselves to him as Lord of our lives, and we stay with him in community with others. We move beyond intelligence to wisdom, beyond rules to love. Communion with Jesus adds ripeness to our readiness and gives our lives unsuspected fruit.

Notes

¹ This view of intelligence is broadly in line with the stance of the distinguished educational thinker Howard Gardner, well known for his theory of multiple intelligences. According to Gardner, intelligence has to involve some form of productivity, and thus high IQ is itself not sufficient. Gardner defines intelligence thus: “Intelligence is a biopsych-

logical potential to process information that can be activated in a cultural setting to solve problems or create products that are of value in a culture.” Howard Gardner, *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21st Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), p. 34.

² Aristotle, *Poetics*, translated with an introduction and notes by Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 37.



Personal/Group Reflection Questions

1. “We think with our whole being and not just with our intellects.” (p. 359)

From my experience, can I give some examples of this kind of thinking?

2. a) What is the evidence I seek when I describe a person as wise?

b) If I were to describe Jesus as a wise person, what examples of his wisdom would I cite from the Gospels?