**Ephesians 5:15-20**

**4 Steps to living a Wise Life**

Churches are full of candles, aren’t they? They are so beautiful and really add to a deep sense of worship. I am sure that when we look at a candle in church, we all have exactly the same thoughts: it probably goes something like this…

 We see the candle and we say to ourselves, “What an interesting collection of hydrocarbons” We think about the liquid wax and marvel at the science of the capillary action drawing it up the candlewick. We are drawn in by the four separate regions of the flame as we reflect on the relationship between hydrogen and oxygen in the burning process. And we meditate together on the convection current drawing the flame upward.

 That’s right, isn’t it? Is that what we think when we see a candle burn in church?

 No, of course it isn’t…

 We see a candle and we are just drawn into the beauty of the flame; the wonder of the life of the candle. We don’t scientifically analyse it, we just watch it - and what we see creates in us an emotional response.

 When people see our lives as Christians, they don’t analyse our belief systems. They don’t try to rationalize our mind processes and try to work out what makes us think the way we do or what makes us believe the things we believe. Instead, people just watch our lives - and they watch to see if what we preach, in terms of the Gospel is matched by the way we live.

 Our lives are like a candle – Jesus said that himself; that we are to be lights lighting up the world. And just as we enjoy the light of a candle without scientific analysis, so people will watch our lives to see if the flame of life is ‘real’ or not.

 And that’s why it is so important to try to live our lives in such a way that we are honouring to God and honouring to the profession of faith that we make as Christians. People watch us to see if being a Christian really does make a difference to our lives. And if people can see a difference, they will be drawn to God themselves. But if people don’t see a difference, they won’t think it worthwhile exploring.

 Your life and my life is like a candle to the world.

 And that is what Paul is saying in the first reading we heard from his letter to the Ephesians. And he starts off with this really stark reminder of the responsibility we have as Christians, he says this: “Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise”.

 At the heart of living life as a Christian is the need to live a wise life.

 I wonder what you think of when you think about wisdom? Maybe you think of the Dalai Lama – a spiritual holy man, whose silence speaks louder than words. Maybe you think of Mother Teresa – the embodiment of compassion, who care for others was a beacon of light in our world. Maybe you think of someone quite unknown to the rest of the world: just an ordinary Christian who was part of your life in the past, or is part of your life today, whose life of prayerful serenity serves as such an example to you. For many of us, when we think about wisdom, we think of an unattainable quality: other people are wise – it’s certainly not something I could achieve for myself. Wisdom is a quality in others to be admired but seemingly beyond my own grasp…

 But in this letter to the Ephesians, Paul disputes that view and he sees wisdom as the ordinary way of living the Christian life. He says, “Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise”.

 We are all called to a life of wisdom.

 But what does that mean? How are we to live wise lives? Well, Paul gives four steps here to living a wise life.

**1. Live life as a gift from God**

Life is a gift – it’s as simple as that.

 In verse 16 of this passage from Ephesians, Paul simply says: “make the most of the time…”

 Isn’t that an excellent motto to live by? That would be a great thing to have written on your tombstone, wouldn’t it? “He made the most of his time…”

 That is the life to which we are called – as Jesus says, “life in all its fullness” - and making the most of our time is the first step to living a wise life.

 If you look at a gravestone, you will read the name of the person and the dates they lived: Jo Bloggs, 1910-1998 or something like that. And in between the two dates is a dash: 1910…dash…1998.

 Have you ever considered what is represented by that little dash? The dash represents a life that has been lived. The dates are not particularly important: Jo Bloggs was born in 1910 – but it could have been 1911 or 1909, it doesn’t matter. Jo Bloggs died in 1998 – but it could have been 1999 or 1997, it doesn’t matter. What matters is the dash between the dates: the dash that represents all that Jo Bloggs did in life; the relationships he formed, the work he undertook, the good things, the bad things in his life, all his joys, all his sorrows. The dash between the dates is what really counts.

 One day, your life and my life will be represented in its entirety by a little dash between two dates. When that day comes, I wonder what your dash will represent? Will you have followed Paul’s advice in this Bible reading? Will you have “made the most of the time”?

 Life is a gift – and one day, it will be gone. Only the dash will remain. What will your dash say to the world?

 How to live a wise life? Firstly, we must make the most of the time…

**2. Work hard to get to know God**

In verse 17, Paul says: “Do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is”.

 If life is a gift, then God is the gift-giver and he has given you the gift of life for a purpose. What is that purpose? Well, that’s for you to find out…and the wise life is hallmarked by the search for meaning.

 Wisdom is hard work – it isn’t given to us on a plate: we need to work at it. And so we need to persevere in prayer and reading the Scriptures and sitting silently waiting on God and taking a few risks too in order to discern what God’s will for our lives might be.

 When I first entered the priesthood, I wasn’t absolutely sure it was what God wanted, but I had a hunch that it might be the case. So I offered myself to the church and said, “I’m here if you want me…” It was a risk for me to do that – but through taking the risk, God’s purpose for my life became clear.

 And so it is with each one of us. It doesn’t mean we are all destined to become priests. But all of us have a destiny to be lived out. All of us have a place in the purposes of God. And the wise life is hallmarked by the search for that place in God’s purposes

 And what happens when we find it? We shine like lights in the world, as we have been destined by God to do.

 Perhaps you already know your purpose in life. Perhaps you are still seeking it. We are here as a community of love, a community of friends, to support one another as we search for our own personal meaning. I am here as a priest to support you in your search for personal meaning.

 Each one of us has a destiny – a life of purpose to be lived. Be wise. Seek out your destiny.

**3. Let your faith transform how you live**

In verse 18, Paul says, “Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit”.

 As we know, when these New Testament letters were written, the writers were responding to particular problems that existed in the churches to which they wrote. So it seems that the church in Ephesus had a problem with people getting drunk too much.

 So the principle that we draw out from this passage is that if we are developing wisdom by treating life as a gift from God and discerning his purpose for our lives, then this will inevitably impact on how we behave. For these Christians in Ephesus, they needed to drink a little less it seems but for you and me, it might be that or it might be something different. In reality, we all have a conscience and we know the areas of our lives that we haven’t fully submitted to God, don’t we? We know those behaviours we have, those thought-patterns we have developed that really are a bit inappropriate and in contradiction to our calling as a Christian. Well, wisdom is worked out as we try to submit these aspects of our lives to God.

 It’s not easy to do that, of course – and we will fail time and time again. And I know that I have certain habits and certain thought-patterns that I have been struggling for years to overcome and even now, more than 30 years after becoming a Christian, I seem no closer to being free from these than I was on Day One.

 But the wise life is not one where we allow ourselves to feel defeated. Instead, we will keep trying to overcome and to honour God by the way we live. Yes, we will fail. Yes, we will struggle. But we keep trying – and we do not give up hope…

 So, how do we live the Wise Life? Firstly, we see life as a gift. Secondly, we try to discern God’s purpose for our lives. Thirdly, we allow our faith to transform how we think and behave.

 And finally…in the wise life, we commit ourselves fully to the church

**4. Commit to the church**

In verse 19, Paul says, “Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts.”

 Here is a call for us to participate regularly in corporate worship together. The pursuit of wisdom is not something that any one of us can do on our own: we need each other, we need each other’s support, encouragement and love if we are to develop in living a wise life

 There are some people who say that you don’t need to come to church to be a Christian. Actually, I disagree. I think absolutely, fundamentally, that weekly worship (at least) is essential for a healthy Christian life because, unless we develop in fellowship with one another, our faith will weaken.

 There’s a story told of two men who were sitting in front of an open fire one evening, talking about matters of faith. And one of the men said, “I don’t think you need to go to church to be a Christian”. The other man didn’t say a word. After a minute or two, he leant forward and took the tongs by the fireplace, reached into the fire and took one of the burning red coals out of the fire, and placed it, on its own, on the hearth. The two men said nothing. They just sat and watched as this red coal, sitting on its own outside of the fire, transformed from a burning hot coal into a cold, dark coal. Sitting on its own, the fire and heat soon went out of the coal. Neither man needed to say anything. The metaphor was obvious.

 If we don’t come to church regularly and warm ourselves with the passion of fellowship with others, the fire and heat of our faith will soon go out.

 Perhaps there has been a time in your life when you stopped coming to church. You found it quite difficult to miss one week. You felt a bit guilty to miss the second week. But it got a bit easier to miss church on week three. And by weeks four and five, you had got out of the habit of coming to church - and it got harder to return than it was to stay away…During that period of absence, the flame of faith died down and you grew colder in your love for God.

 The wise life is lived in Christian community – because, quite simply, we need each other…

So in conclusion then, Paul tells us that wisdom is not reserved for the very holy people. It’s not just the Dalai Lama or the Mother Teresa’s of this world who are called to be wise: instead, wisdom is for ordinary Christians like you and me. Paul says: “Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise”.

 And how do we live a wise life? In these 4 ways. First, by treating life as a gift from God. Second, by discovering our destiny: God’s purpose for our lives. Third, by allowing our faith to transform how we think and how we behave. Fourth, by committing ourselves to regular attendance and participation at church.

 If we follow these 4 steps, we will know wisdom. As a writer once put it, “Never mistake knowledge for wisdom. One helps you make a living; the other helps you make a life.”

 Jesus said, “I have come so that you make have life in all its fullness”.

 Be wise. Choose life.