

Guidance v Common Sense

I don't know what your expectations are when you come to listen to a sermon being preached. Perhaps you are looking for the minister to give some divine words of wisdom that resonate in the very core of your being. Perhaps you are coming to learn something new from a passage of scripture that you had never noticed before, perhaps a detail that you had never spotted or a way of seeing something in a different light. Tonight however is special because tonight I'm going to be telling you what you already know. We're going to be looking at the perfectly understandable, the easy peasy and the blindingly obvious. Because our theme for tonight is 'Common Sense'.

Common sense is a lovely concept isn't it. Nothing complicated, nothing clever but the sense that is common to all. The stuff that anyone with half a brain cell knows.

Of course some people have the rare condition of not even having half a brain cell. A point that is often proven in the answers given in exams. The following were all answers given during a history exam.

1. Ancient Egypt was inhabited by mummies and they all wrote in hydraulics. They lived in the Sarah Desert and traveled by Camelot. The climate of the Sarah is such that the inhabitants have to live elsewhere.
2. Socrates was a famous Greek teacher who went around giving people advice. They killed him. Socrates died from an overdose of wedlock. After his death, his career suffered a dramatic decline.
3. Joan of Arc was burnt to a steak and was canonized by Bernard Shaw. Finally Magna Carta provided that no man should be hanged twice for the same offense.
4. In midevil times most people were alliterate. The greatest writer of the futile ages was Chaucer, who wrote many poems and verses and also wrote literature.
5. Moses led the Hebrew slaves to the Red Sea, where they made unleavened bread which is bread made without any ingredients. Moses went up on Mount Cyanide to get the ten commandments. He died before he ever reached Canada.

Some not so clever answers there. We might well think that the people who gave those answers will not get very far in life because we live in a world now where so much of what we do is determined by how clever we are. Almost every application form you fill out will have a section on it that asks you to state your qualifications and grades. It's usually the section of the form that fills me with dread but for some people, it's the section of the form that they enjoy filling in the most. But you know, we only have ourselves to blame. Did you know, it was the English who invented the written exam? Apparently so. I was watching QI the other week and it was a question that came up on there. Apparently it's a relatively modern invention. I think it was around about the 1930's that written exams were invented. Before that students would be tested orally so would simply have to answer questions or talk about what they knew but it was never formally recorded until Cambridge University

decided it would be a good idea to have written questions to which the students would provide written answers. And the system has stuck and is now used all over the world. Writing the answers down in this way demonstrates how clever we are... or not as the case was in those exam answers.

We would be justified in thinking that if they know as much about their other subjects as they do about history, then their chances of becoming a high flyer in the business world look pretty slim.

Although they would probably do okay in the Christian life because of course, everybody knows, you don't need brains to be a Christian. It says so in Luke 12.

Luke 12:11

"And when you are brought to trial in the synagogues and before rulers and authorities, don't worry about how to defend yourself or what to say, 12 for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what needs to be said."

A very similar thing is said in Luke 21

Luke 21:10-15

¹⁰Then he said to them: "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.

¹¹There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven.

¹²"But before all this, they will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. ¹³This will result in your being witnesses to them. ¹⁴But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. ¹⁵For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict.

I don't know what you make of those verses but some people have interpreted these passages as a licence for preachers to be lazy and not do any preparation for sermons because it says "The Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what needs to be said." For sure, there are times when the Holy Spirit does lead in this way, but what Jesus is talking about here is extreme circumstances. When your back is against the wall and there is no other option. Of course, I believe that the Holy Spirit does speak through preachers and I hope He speaks through me. Otherwise I speak only my own words and do not preach the word of God. But does all of this mean that when it comes to finding the will of God, we should disengage our brain and simply let God lead us moment by moment?

But if God didn't want us to use our brain then why did he create us with such a magnificent brain? It is the human brain that puts us above all the other creatures that God created. The human brain is amazing. We can work out solutions to all manner of problems, thanks to our ability to use our intellect.

I came across this story the other day of someone who used their intellect to solve the problem of there never being a policeman around when you need one:

Going to bed the other night I noticed people in my shed stealing things. I phoned the police but was told no one was in the area to help. They said they would send someone over as soon as possible.

I hung up. A minute later I rang again. "Hello," I said, "I called you a minute ago because there were people in my shed. You don't have to hurry now, because I've shot them."

Within minutes there were half a dozen police cars in the area, plus helicopters and an armed response unit. They caught the burglars red-handed.

One of the officers said: "I thought you said you'd shot them."

To which I replied: "I thought you said there was no one in the area."

(J. John & Mark Stibbe, A Barrel of Fun, p100)

A very clever solution to the problem and a good display of using your loaf. God expects us to use our loaf a bit too.

To help us think about this I want us to look together at some very familiar passages that all have one thing in common. They are all passages in which Jesus challenges people to think for themselves.

Luke 10:25-37 (The Parable of the Good Samaritan)

In this passage the expert in the law stands up to test Jesus asking "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" How would you have answered that question? If a neighbour of a work colleague said to you, "what do I need to do to have eternal life?" What would you say in response? It's interesting to note that Jesus' answer was to challenge the man to think for himself. It says "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?" They are astonishing words, especially when you think of the culture of that time but Jesus recognised that here was a man who was an expert in the law. Jesus wasn't talking to someone who had never read the Bible, he was talking to someone who had intimate knowledge of the Bible. So the answer Jesus gives is really "well, you've studied the Bible, is there anything that you have read that tells you the answer to your question?" Jesus was asking the man to think for himself. And we see that the man actually did know the answer. He says "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

The expert in the law knew what was required by God but he didn't seem to like the answer, so he tries to look for a loophole by asking Jesus "And who is my neighbour?" This leads to the familiar parable of the Good Samaritan. But what I want you to notice is the bit at the end:

V36 (Jesus said) "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

Again, Jesus doesn't answer the question directly, he simply gives the illustration and asks the man to think for himself.

Now you may think with that example that it's understandable that Jesus asked the expert in the law to think for himself. After all, he is an expert, a well educated man. But it's not only the well educated who Jesus asked to think for themselves.

Matthew 18:12

¹²"What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? ¹³And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. ¹⁴In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.

Jesus uses common sense to get the point across that God is concerned about the lost. Jesus here uses an example that would have been very familiar to the people he was speaking to. The idea of shepherds taking care of herds of sheep would have been something they knew very well. It's as though Jesus is saying, "This is plain common sense, some of you will know that as farmers, if one of your sheep is in trouble, you go after it and leave the other 99 behind. They are okay, they are in the safety of the pen. But the sheep that wanders off is in danger."

So when we as a church ask who should we be most concerned about, is God saying to us, 'use your head, think about it logically from what you know.' Who are the safe sheep in our church? Who are the people who have a strong faith? They are like the 99 who don't wander off. The owner of the sheep is very happy that they have not wandered off but in a sense, they don't need extra care and attention. They are in a safe place, they're not about to wander off. On the other hand, there are those who are vulnerable. I don't know if you interpret this passage as Jesus still talking about children or whether you think he is now talking about the vulnerable or perhaps more likely, the spiritually vulnerable. Who are the people within our flock who are at risk of wandering off? Who are the ones whose faith is vulnerable? Who are the ones we need to look out for? Who are the ones we need to go after and bring back into the flock?

Jesus challenges us to use our head. Who are the ones we should focus our effort on as a church? Jesus said that a shepherd who finds a lost sheep is happier about that one sheep than about 99 who didn't wander off. If that is how God feels about the lost, or about those whose faith is at risk of crumbling, then shouldn't we be just as concerned about them? It seems common sense to me that if God is happier when one vulnerable sheep is saved from getting lost, then if we want to make God happy, surely that is what we should be working on.

Jesus uses the same phrase to speak about our response to God.

Matthew 21:28-32

²⁸"What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.'

²⁹" 'I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.

³⁰"Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go.

³¹"Which of the two did what his father wanted?"
"The first," they answered.

Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. ³²For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.

Jesus uses plain common sense to make the point that the important thing about our response to him is our actions. Saying a prayer of commitment is great, but that in itself is not enough to save you. It has to be followed up by genuinely following Jesus. On the other hand, someone who you have spoken to time and time again about Jesus and they're just not interested, but then that person later decides to follow him, I think they will be saved.

Jesus' words are quite scary aren't they? Especially if we assume that Jesus is still talking to the Chief Priests and the Elders. And he says to them that the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of them.

It's common sense isn't it? If you ask someone to do something for you and they say, yes of course, but then don't do it – initially you are quite pleased because they said they would do what you asked. But ultimately you are left disappointed. On the other hand if you ask someone to do something for you and they say no, they're not interested in helping you, but in the end they do it – initially you might be disappointed but ultimately, you are pleased. Which is the better of the two? Which one ultimately did as you asked?

I think a challenge for us is what we say to God in church. The words that we sing in our hymns, do we mean them? The promises we may make in front of others that amount to empty words because they are not backed up with action. The things that we say to God in this place when our heads are bowed, but come Monday morning, it is quickly forgotten.

We don't really need to ask God how he feels about these things, it's obvious, it's common sense.

Jesus also uses common sense to logically challenge misconceptions.

Matthew 22:42

⁴¹While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, ⁴²"What do you think about the Christ^[d]? Whose son is he?"

"The son of David," they replied.

⁴³He said to them, "How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him 'Lord'? For he says,

⁴⁴"The Lord said to my Lord:

"Sit at my right hand
until I put your enemies

under your feet." ^[e]⁴⁵If then David calls him 'Lord,' how can he be his son?" ⁴⁶No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions.

The people thought that the Messiah was a descendant of David but Jesus used logic to make them think about how inconsistent this was. David called the Messiah "my Lord". Jesus said "if David called the Messiah 'my Lord' how could he be David's son?"

Jesus was of course humanly in the line of David. We see that in the genealogy given at the start of Matthew's gospel. But Jesus was trying to get them to see things in a deeper sense.

Jesus seems to suggest that we should use our brain.

Matthew 13:10-17

¹⁰The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?"

¹¹He replied, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. ¹²Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. ¹³This is why I speak to them in parables:

"Though seeing, they do not see;

though hearing, they do not hear or understand. ¹⁴In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah:

" 'You will be ever hearing but never understanding;

you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.'

¹⁵For this people's heart has become calloused;

they hardly hear with their ears,

and they have closed their eyes.

Otherwise they might see with their eyes,

hear with their ears,

understand with their hearts

and turn, and I would heal them."^[a] ¹⁶But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. ¹⁷For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.

The parables are not designed to make the things of the kingdom easier to understand, they're designed to make people think. The parables obscure the truth, you have to work at it if you want to discover the truth under the surface. Just like a child at school is not told all the answers, they are given some hints and then asked to find the solution themselves. By working at it, the child has a better understanding and not only do they find the answer to that particular problem, but they develop the ability to solve other problems too. Jesus hints at the solution but if we want to know the answer, we need to work at it. By doing so, we have a better spiritual understanding.

Of course there are times when common sense and our human intellect let us down.

Matthew 17:24-27

²⁴After Jesus and his disciples arrived in Capernaum, the collectors of the two-drachma tax came to Peter and asked, "Doesn't your teacher pay the temple tax^[b]?"

²⁵"Yes, he does," he replied.

When Peter came into the house, Jesus was the first to speak. "What do you think, Simon?" he asked. "From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes—from their own sons or from others?"

²⁶"From others," Peter answered.

"Then the sons are exempt," Jesus said to him. ²⁷"But so that we may not offend them, go to the lake and throw out your line. Take the first fish you catch; open its mouth and you will find a four-drachma coin. Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours."

Simon Peter is often portrayed as the disciple who doesn't use his brain much, especially before he speaks. Once again Peter blurts out the first thing that comes into his head and although he is only trying to defend Jesus, his words put Jesus and the disciples in an awkward position. Jesus however uses this

situation to teach Peter about his kingship. He asks Simon Peter to use his brain and to think. The phrase is there again, "What do you think..."

But the time when common sense and reason can most let us down is when we are influenced by others. Sometimes our judgement can be clouded by what others make us believe, or by our expectations, or by the pressure to conform.

Matthew 26:57-67

(v66) What do you think?" "He is worthy of death," they answered.

Caiaphas, the high priest asked the crowd "what do you think?" and they answered that Jesus should be crucified. They didn't understand who Jesus was and so thought he was blaspheming. Sometimes what we think is coloured by external influences (e.g. what we have been taught, others opinions, etc.)

Most did not see Jesus as the Messiah, the son of God. So most of the crowd saw him as a blasphemer. A mere man who claimed to be the son of God. They knew of Jesus, they could see that he was a man like anyone else. There was nothing special in his appearance. He needed to eat and sleep just like anyone else. They may have even known his parents, how could he be God's son? Logic said that this didn't make sense – so relying solely on logic can be a dangerous move.

Luckily though we don't have to rely solely on our own logic or common sense. God does reveal things to us that logic never could.

¹³When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

Matthew 16:14-17

¹⁴They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

¹⁵"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

¹⁶Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ,^[b] the Son of the living God."

¹⁷Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.

Many people in the area had an opinion on who Jesus was. Looking logically at him, using their head, they had come to realise that Jesus was someone special. Some had come to the conclusion that he must be John the Baptist, some thought he was Elijah or Jeremiah or maybe another prophet.

But Simon Peter had his eyes opened by God to see beyond what common sense and logic were capable of seeing. He was able to recognise who Jesus really was. Jesus said himself that this was not revealed to him by people, it wasn't a conclusion you could come to logically. Only God could have revealed this.

So where does all that leave us?

Well, God has given us a brain to use, so we should use it. God doesn't expect us to consult him on every little thing any more than you want your children phoning you up to ask what they should wear today. It's common sense. You'd probably say "is it cold? Well wear something warm then." "Is it raining? Then don't wear flip-flops". There are things that God expects us to work out for ourselves. In those things, it is being spiritually lazy when we ask God to sort these things out for us.

However, we need to be careful with that because there is a danger of leaving God out of our decision making. How often have you seen Christians make plans where they should have consulted God but they didn't and decisions have been made, then at the end of the meeting, God is asked to bless the plans that have been made?

So there is a balance between these two. We need to use our head and use our common sense, but in doing so, we need to ensure that we do not leave God out of our decision making because there are sometimes we don't have as much sense as we might like to think and there are some situations where common sense and logic isn't enough.

We need both our common sense and God's guidance.