

I was persuaded to watch Prime Minister's questions on Wednesday. It was Keir Starmer's first one and he was, of course, facing Dominic Raab.

I thought Raab played a pretty straight bat on what is, after all, a very sticky wicket. Starmer was successful in tempting him into making a couple of errors. I'm making it sound like a spectator sport!

Raab's main tactic was to keep repeating key phrases. One of them was '*we are making the right decisions at the right time*'. Another was '*we have always been guided by the science*'. Starmer nodded as Raab said this. It did not suit his purpose to challenge these statements.

It has not proved easy though to make decisions that are '*guided by the science*'. In the middle of March when our government began to change its policy on the coronavirus, Laura Kuenssberg tried to explain this dramatic shift by saying that '*the science had changed*'.

Science doesn't really change of course. But our understanding of it is imperfect and, therefore, continuously evolving. And different people's understanding of science can vary hugely. Scientists do not agree. Our government was listening to some voices in the scientific community but not to others. Unfortunately for all of us, we now see with hindsight that they were listening to the wrong voices. And now we are playing catch up.

The Council of High Priests and the Ruling Body of the Elders of Israel were faced with an impossible problem. They had imprisoned Peter and the apostles but it turned out that no prison could hold them. They had instructed them not to teach the people about Jesus but they had said they would continue to do so. Peter remained defiant. '*We must obey God rather than any human authority.*' (Acts 5: 29) (A statement which sits uneasily with messages conveyed in his later letters about the need to be obedient to those in authority, eg 1 Peter 2: 18). Full of the Holy Spirit, Peter and the apostles were being guided, not by science, but by God.

The priests and elders were flummoxed so Gamaliel had the apostles taken away so he could propose a strategy to his colleagues. Essentially Gamaliel explained to his colleagues that theirs was a very sticky wicket. And so he proposed they opt for a policy of making the right decision at the right time and being guided by God in the matter. If, Gamaliel argued, these Jesus followers were not being guided by God then they would meet with disaster soon enough. But if they were being guided by God, then it would be disastrous to oppose them because that would mean opposing God. It was a sensible and pragmatic strategy.

And so the priests and elders agreed just to have Peter and the apostles flogged and sent away with further threats ringing in their ears.

How do we as a church make sure we are being guided by God?

It is easy, after all, to find a particular verse somewhere in the Bible to support the thing you wanted to do anyway. Let's not play that game. It is difficult to be truly guided by God but

that doesn't mean we shouldn't try. We can open ourselves to the Holy Spirit through prayer, through studying God's word and taking the full counsel of Scripture when we do so, through discussion within the church, through the sharing of experiences of the world with others, through taking time to reflect, having made sure we have allowed all voices to be heard.

Above all it is a collective process. And sometimes a lengthy one. But, a process, nevertheless, that we commit to on an ongoing basis.

Here is a prayer I use sometimes when I sense I need God's guidance. It is a prayer of Philaret, Metropolitan of Moscow and, apparently, a favourite prayer of Rowan Williams, formerly Archbishop of Canterbury.

O Lord, grant that I may meet the coming day in peace.

Help me in all things to rely upon Thy Holy Will.

In every hour of the day, reveal Thy will to me.

Bless my dealings with all who surround me.

Teach me to treat all that come to me

throughout the day with peace of soul,

and with the firm conviction that Thy will governs all.

In all my deeds and words, guide my thoughts and feelings.

In unforeseen events, let me not forget that all are sent by Thee.

Teach me to act firmly and wisely, without embittering and embarrassing others.

Give me the strength to bear the fatigue of the coming day with all that it shall bring.

Direct my will. Teach me to pray. Pray Thou Thyself in me.

Amen.