
New Beginnings

A Sermon at Union Chapel

Readings: Proverbs 31:10–31
Mark 9:30–37

24 September 2006

Who can find a good wife?
Her worth is far beyond red coral.

Proverbs 31:10

Well, I'm not married to anyone like this, and neither is anyone I know. And, I must admit, I find the notion a bit scary; sharing a house with this insomniac bedding manufacturer. What does it mean? And why, anyway, is it in the Bible?

The book of Proverbs is, unsurprisingly, a collection of sayings: many of them seem to go back to royal courts in Israel. The sayings are very similar to collections of sayings which we have from other middle eastern royal courts at the time: courts were getting more bureaucratic, and they needed administrators, and a lot of this literature reads like training manuals for administrators. So, it was like the management literature of the time.

Now this reading comes from a section of Proverbs which consists of sayings that a certain King Lemuel got from his mother. So, if we ask "what is this reading?" we could answer "it's Lemuel's mum giving him advice on choosing a wife". Sensible advice, under the circumstances: if you were a king, then, you would probably want a wife who could organise your household. It would be a big job, and the wife was expected to be a hard worker. All very Martha Stewart: the responsibilities of running a large household, preserving your husband's reputation, making sure that they talk about you at the city gate.

Here's another answer to the same question: this reading is actually a poem. It's a very elaborate poem: it has, if you count, 22 verses, and there are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet, and each verse starts with one of the letters, in order: aleph, beth, gimel, dalet, and so on. Less

Martha Stewart, this part of it: we don't really imagine the writing of finely crafted verse to be part of the homemaker skill set. And, from this point of view, the poem seems less directly about being an ideal wife, and more allegorical: it could well be a description of wisdom, of what wisdom gives to people who seek it, of the riches and satisfaction that it brings with it. Wisdom, personified as a woman, and the (male) seeker after wisdom as her husband.

So what has any of this to say to us? It is all very much of its time and of its society: about how to find a good wife, about how to be a wise man, about the benefits of a wife who is a business manager. And, though it is reassuring to see women with power and responsibility, the woman still has to fit in with the man's needs. It is also, unmistakably, a description of how rich people live: it shows us a prosperous woman in charge of a big household.

Here is another thing about this, in either of its aspects, either as wife choice manual or as allegory of wisdom: it is relentlessly optimistic. It either assumes that you can just take your checklist, and go through the candidates, and find the perfect wife: or it assumes that, if you acquire wisdom, you will become rich and prosperous. And we all know that, either way round, life is just not like that.

So, beautiful and fascinating though this poem is, it is easy to feel a bit alienated by it, for all of these reasons. But we can say something in its favour. It is about how to lead a rational life: not rational in a narrow sense, and not even rational in a very intellectual sense, but we need to be able to make sensible decisions, and live in a constructive way, and we want to avoid damaging ourselves, others, and the environment out of foolishness or ignorance. And we want to live in a society that is ordered in such a way that these things become easier. The book of Proverbs addresses these needs: maybe in a very idealised way, and maybe it's not even very deep, but it is something that needs saying. And it also sees the connection between wisdom and God: right at the end, we have "the woman who fears the Lord is honoured". So, for these reasons, it deserves a place in our Bibles: not a very central place, and, in the Hebrew bible, it does not have a very central place (it is in the section of the Hebrew bible called the "writings"), but it has a central place nevertheless.

The New Testament reading, on the other hand, has a very central place in our faith. It combines many of the main themes of the New Testament: the death of Jesus, the resurrection, the way that his disciples should behave. However you respond to what Jesus says here, you cannot accuse him of being overly optimistic: here is someone who sees his future, sees the consequences of doing the right thing, and does not at-

tempt to gloss anything over. You cannot, again, accuse him of telling his disciples that things will automatically go well for them: they did not, and Jesus was at pains to point this out. And we just do not get the picture that we get in Proverbs, where there is this rather easy transition between human wisdom and the religious life: we get, here, in what Jesus says and does, the sense of something absolutely new, of a sudden break between on the one hand, what is old and customary and, on the other hand, the new life which Jesus brings.

He picks up a child and puts it in the middle of them. It's easy to sentimentalise children if you just think of them in the abstract, or when they're not there. Jesus gets round this sentimentality: here, he says, look at this child. Maybe not a very well behaved child, maybe not a very clean child, maybe a child with an agenda of its own who was yelling and screaming and doing the sort of things that little children do. Here, he says, this is who you must receive: who you must pay attention to, must take account of. And, rather than taking account of the rich important people – the sort of people who hang round the city gate and decide on who's a virtuous and skilled wife – you should take account of people like this; and, in so doing, you will receive God. This, he says, is the way that I live, and the way that you must live.

It is by living, and dying, like that, that Jesus showed what the world lacked. Not the sort of superficial well ordering that Proverbs was talking about, but the sort of new beginning that would change absolutely the way that people relate to each other: a change that comes about because God had started it, had started it by coming to us when we thought we were masters but were in fact slaves to the dark forces of the world, had come to us to show us who we were and what we could be. Here, he says, this is how you start: receive this child, and it starts.

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