

**Sermon for Riddells Creek and Mount Macedon
20 September 2009**

Proverbs 31:10-31

Psalm 1

Mark 9:30-37

I never thought that I would preach a sermon on “the ideal wife”. In fact, at Lancefield last week the idea of me preaching on it was suggested as a joke. But the reading from Proverbs that my Bible describes as the “Ode to a Capable Wife” is part of our lectionary, which suggests that many people believe that it has the potential to say important things to us. After spending the week pondering it, I’ve decided that that’s true, especially when we look at the reading from Proverbs in light of today’s Psalm. Putting the two side by side makes for interesting reading.

As I said last time I was here, the lectionary is currently working its way through excerpts from the Bible’s collection of wisdom literature. Wisdom literature emphasises the lessons and insights of experience. It gives practical advice on how to live. The aim of the book of Proverbs, from which today’s reading comes, is to provide a guide to living a life of well-being, decency, and dignity.¹ According to today’s reading, part of that appears to be finding a capable wife. The reading is an acrostic – in Hebrew each line begins with a different letter in the Hebrew alphabet in order, so we could say that it describes an ideal wife from A to Z.

The picture of the woman which this acrostic paints is overwhelming. She’s a person who can manage a household competently in all areas: spinning, weaving, physical work. She ensures supplies are in store; she’s able to deal with finances and can see a good investment when it arises. She’s active and commanding in the marketplace as well as in the home: this woman purchases property. The mention of linen garments and the use of the colour purple indicate that hers is a household of some wealth, because these things were luxuries. This wealth seems to be the result of the woman’s work - her husband apparently has nothing to do but “sit among the elders of the land at the gates”. With all this business and economic acumen neither her husband nor children seem to be neglected. “Her children rise up and call her happy; her husband too, and he praises her”. The only feature that we don’t hear about is how this woman looks. While the Song of Solomon, which is also wisdom literature, describes the beauty of the bride in tremendous detail, beauty doesn’t seem to be an attribute required here. In fact, beauty is described as vain and charm as deceitful. I suppose we can only be glad that this woman isn’t a supermodel, as well as everything else.

The capable wife cares not only for her husband, children, and household. Her generosity extends beyond them to the poor and needy in the wider community: “She opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out her hands to the needy.” She is one of the generous that the Book of Proverbs earlier described as blessed.² This woman is perfect; and that’s actually how the Jerusalem Bible translates the poem’s opening verse: “A perfect wife – who can find her?” I would imagine the answer is “no one”.

This poem reminds me of discussions of whether women can have it all – the fulfilling career (working, weaving, buying property, selling clothes) *and* the happy family life (doing her husband good, looking well to the ways of her household). The statement that the ideal wife rises so early in the morning that it’s still night and that her lamp doesn’t go out at night suggests that the capable wife is one of those women who work a double shift, in paid employment and then at home. That’s not necessarily a recipe for happiness. It seems to me that this poem describes an impossible ideal; one that no real woman can live up to. If we take it as a literal description of the ideal wife, every real wife is going to fall short.

¹ http://oldtestamentlectionary.unitingchurch.org.au/2009/September/Pent16Prov31_09.htm

² Proverbs 22:9.

Since this reading comes from the Hebrew Scriptures, I asked a friend about Jewish interpretations of this poem. She tells me that husbands are meant to recite this to their wives every Sabbath. But because it can be seen as limiting women in the roles they can play, some Jewish movements include excerpts from Psalm 112 in praise of the husband, in addition to the *Eishet Hayil*, as part of the Friday night Sabbath rituals, so a husband's praise of his wife is balanced with a wife's blessing for her husband.

On the other hand, Tamara Cohen wrote a poem in response to this passage in which she says: "*When it came time for my father to sing Eishet Hayil, A Woman of Valor, my mother the proud feminist, wanted the song. Every word of it. She'd worked hard...She wanted the song. ...Because an Eishet Hayil is a woman of strength and woman of strength is not hard to find. She is my mother, my grandmother, my sister, my friend. ... A woman of strength within **myself** I will find.*"³ I'm still not sure whether the woman to whom this was recited would find it complimentary or terrifying, but these are some of the Jewish responses to this passage.

What do we do with this poem? Do we read it as a description of what a wife is meant to be? Bruce Prewer, preaching on this passage, says: "Many devout women over the centuries have taken this CV as a role model. None have reached its heights. Many have tried, though; valiantly tried. Indeed some self effacing and capable wives have almost made it. A few of these have allowed their near-success go to their heads. They have presumed to look down at other struggling wives, preened themselves, and dared to gloat a little over the manifest shortcoming of their lesser sisters. More often, Christian women have become discouraged when they have given it their best shot yet fallen far short of the ideal wife as outlined" here.⁴ And no wonder.

Fortunately, that's not the only way to read this passage. This poem is the very end of the Book of Proverbs. The very last verse of the whole Book is "Give her a share in the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the city gates." Which, at least to me, raises the question of what is at the beginning of the Book of Proverbs. And when we look back at the first chapter we find another woman: Lady Wisdom. Last week the lectionary gave us this passage, in which Lady Wisdom cries out in the streets, calling people to heed her and telling them: "those who listen to me will be secure and will live at ease, without dread of disaster".⁵ It is possible that the description of the capable wife is actually a description of the life that is lived when one invites Lady Wisdom into one's home.

(Interestingly, Jewish commentators have also seen the capable wife as allegorical, seeing her as representing the Shechinah (Divine presence), the Shabbat, the Torah, wisdom, or the soul.)

Alternatively, we can read this poem as a description of the ideal women, and look at it through the lens of today's psalm. Psalm 1 is a wisdom psalm that talks about the joys of those who meditate on the law of the Lord – those who are wise, although that word isn't used. If we look at today's Old Testament readings together they remind us that the practical matters of life – care for daily needs in detail and proficiency and for the needs of those around us – are part of the wisdom that is seen as righteousness. Reading them together reminds us of that at the heart of all wisdom is a faithful pursuit of the way of God in the world. They help us to perceive that all our living, even those tasks which are often overlooked or which are regarded as routine, are part of our praise of God. The righteousness that the psalm praises includes the practicalities the wife is concerned with. And both come from a relationship with God. Caring for a household, providing for the poor, doing daily tasks over and over again – these can be part of our worship and our relationship with God. Remembering that is part of the wisdom that the psalm praises. That's true not just for wives, but for everyone.

³ Tamara Cohen, "A Woman of Valor Poem" at www.ritualwell.org

⁴ <http://home.alphalink.com.au/~nigel/DocB/B060924.htm>

⁵ Proverbs 1:33.

So, that's my sermon on the ideal wife. Since I'm not a wife, and I don't have a wife, I'm going to be interested to hear what those of you with more experience in the area think of it over coffee.