

Comments

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost September 19, 2021

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.

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Proverbs 31:10-31

NRSV

The book ends with this poem, a detailed description of the roles and qualities of “a capable wife”. This appears to be part of “the words of King Lemuel. An oracle that his mother taught him” (v. 1). Lemuel was of a tribe descended from Abraham’s son Ishmael. Similar advice to a ruler is found in Egyptian and Babylonian texts. The poem serves as a summary of Proverbs.

Finding a good wife is also mentioned in 18:22: “He who finds a good wife finds a good thing, and obtains favour from the LORD”. Several of the wife’s qualities are also those of Lady Wisdom – so is the wife wisdom? In four places in Proverbs, wisdom is said to be “more precious [or better] than jewels” (v. 10). The wife’s values to her husband are reminiscent of those of wisdom to her followers. Vv. 13-27 speak of the woman’s extraordinary and ceaseless activity, and her good relationship with her family (vv. 11, 27-28). She and her husband are wealthy (vv. 21-23); he is a leader of the community (v. 23). She manages the household (v. 15b), is a business woman (vv. 14, 16, 18, 24) and does strenuous tasks (v. 17). She also does household activities (vv. 15a, 19). Both a “distaff” (v. 19) and a “spindle” are used in spinning. She makes fine clothes for her family, and is generous to “the needy” (v. 20). She is godly, so she “laughs” (v. 25) as she looks forward to Judgement Day; she is wise (v. 26) and teaches “kindness”. In v. 27, “she looks well to” is *sophiyyah* in the Hebrew text – so perhaps there is a word play on *sophia*, Greek for *wisdom*. The book begins with awe for the Lord (1:7) and it ends on the same theme (v. 30). Perhaps v. 31 is a prayer: may she share in her own productivity; may her deeds be praised by all.

Psalm 1

NRSV

This psalm is an introduction to the book of Psalms; it contrasts the fate of the godly and the ungodly. Vv. 1-3 speak of the happiness of the godly. They do not live as the ungodly do; rather they constantly (“day and night”, v. 2) and joyfully study and observe Mosaic law; their well-being is like trees which bear fruit. They are prosperous. But, on the other hand, the ungodly are “like chaff” (v. 4) in manual threshing: the crushed sheaves were tossed into the air, where the wind blew the chaff away. So, say vv. 5-6, their fate will be disaster: they will be excluded from the fellowship enjoyed by those who follow God’s ways, and will suffer – unlike the godly, over whom God keeps watch.

James 3:13-4:3,7-8a

NRSV

The author has identified one sin commonly found in the community: intemperate speech. Now he seeks to correct a second: arrogance – and in the process, tells us the qualities of wisdom. His understanding of wisdom is like that of the Old Tes-

tament wisdom writers, and of Paul. If you *do* in life with “gentleness”, moderation, courtesy and humility (all qualities bound up in the same Greek word) then you are motivated by “wisdom” (3:13). But if “bitter envy” (3:14) or “selfish ambition” controls you, you must not boast of it and must not be “false to the truth”, i.e. Christian revelation, as put into practice by those who are wise. (The *heart* was considered the control centre of personality.) For being “false”, “such wisdom” (3:15) is “earthly” rather than heavenly (“from above”); it is from the devil. “Envy and selfish ambition” (3:16, or quarrels) are the tools of evil; the devil works through “disorder”. On the other hand, godly wisdom is “peaceable ...” (3:17). It does not dominate, but rather yields “good fruits”, to all, openly. Then 3:18: “those who make peace”, i.e. wise people, will, at Judgement Day, have (or be rewarded with) great integrity in the eyes of God.

But quarrels (“conflicts and disputes”, 4:1) in the community show a lack of “peace” (3:18); they should be resolved. Are they not the result of conflicting inner urges (“cravings”, 4:1)? The author gives two examples: murdering to gain what you do not have, and desiring something belonging to someone else (“covet”, 4:2). God gives us whatever we ask, so if you do not receive, it is either because you do not ask him, or you ask for your personal gain (“your pleasures”, 4:3). One cannot be in love with earthly things and with God: such loves are incompatible (4:4). So completely devote yourselves to God’s ways (4:7). Say *no* to the devil, and he will leave you alone. If you approach God, he will come close to you.

Mark 9:30-37

NRSV

The disciples have failed to cure an epileptic boy of an unclean spirit (vv. 14-29); this has led to them being puzzled. After Jesus cures him, they ask: how could you cure him but we could not? Jesus tells them: that kind of healing requires the power of prayer; it can’t be done by earthly means.

Now, as they travel from Caesarea Philippi to Jerusalem, they re-enter Jewish territory (“Galilee”, v. 30). Jesus again wishes to avoid partial understanding of him and his mission. He again teaches that he, the “Son of Man is to be” (v. 31) *killed*, but adds one new idea: he is to be “betrayed” or *handed over* to people; this is part of God’s plan. Both his suffering and betrayal are so beyond the understanding of the disciples that they dare not reveal their ignorance.

Jesus now teaches more about being his followers. (Presumably “the house”, v. 33, is Peter’s – see 1:29.) The disciples have been arguing over rank. Jesus says, in effect: *to be my disciple, you must abandon seeking position and prestige*. He takes an example (vv. 36-37): to welcome a child “in my name” (because of regard for who and what I am) is to welcome me, and indeed God. In Aramaic and Greek the word for “child” is the same as for *servant*, so v. 36 may also speak of welcoming a *servant*, one sent by his master. If so, Jesus is saying: whoever receives the servant receives the master. Whoever receives a child receives Jesus, and whoever receives Jesus receives God, who sent him. Both child and servant are without status. They are unable to repay a kindness, in earthly terms.

