

Readings: Proverbs 31.10-31; Psalm 1; James 3.13 ff; Mark 9.30-37

I suspect that over the years St John's Bentleigh has heard some pretty forthright preaching on this very well-known passage from the end of the Book of Proverbs when it has come along periodically every three years or so. Well, here it is again, and I want to spend a few minutes with you this morning pondering what this poem has to say to us— along with its companion piece at the beginning of the Book of Psalms.

Let's begin with Proverbs. It's got *prarblems*- as my church history lecturer used to say because it is one of those commonly misinterpreted passages of scripture. Like most such passages – and I'm sure you can think of many many others – our confusion centres around genre – the type of writing it is; its intended audience, and its language. Just as an aside Rachel Held Evans thinks that the culminating verse "*Charm is deceitful and beauty is passing, but a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised.*" . might be one of the most cross-stitched Bible verses of all time.

GRAPHIC

With that in mind, here are three things you might not know about the Book of Proverbs.

1. Proverbs 31 is a poem.

It is a poem of twenty-two-lines found in the last chapter of the book of Proverbs, and its subject is the "woman of noble character". It is meant to be a tangible expression of the book's celebrated virtue of wisdom. The author is essentially showing us what wisdom looks like in action.

The poem is an acrostic, so the first word of each verse begins with a letter from the Hebrew alphabet in succession. To understand what an acrostic is, try to name a nonfantastical animal that starts with the letter U - and you will understand how difficult it is to create an acrostic poem.

GRAPHIC

Well ... is that a bald-faced lie, I wonder?

Acrostic poems draw attention to the first letter of each line. Here is an example in English. Can you work out the name of the little girl whose name is spelt out by reading down the first letters of each line?

GRAPHIC

I'll give you a clue – she has a habit of chasing rabbits down rabbit holes.

In the case of Proverbs 31 each line begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. It is a device that makes this passage stand out within the Book of Proverbs but there are other examples in the Psalms and in the Wisdom literature of the Hebrew Scriptures.

GRAPHIC

This shows the Hebrew letter itself on the left-hand column (in green), followed by its transliterated name, the Hebrew word that begins it (in yellow), and the English translation of that word that appears in the poem.

The purposes of the alphabetic acrostics vary by the poem but some scholars think that it was an aid to oral memorisation or, because they are so difficult to compose were an ostentatious show of scribal technique. In Proverbs 31 the acrostic fits the purpose of the poem and the book. It paints a picture of a woman who embodies real practical wisdom from A to Z or from *aleph* to *tav*. But it isn't exhaustive when it comes to the scope of economic activity for an ancient Israelite woman. The acrostic may be helping to communicate something that the content of the poem doesn't: a sense of totality as the poet praises the everyday achievements of an upper-class Jewish wife, a woman who keeps her household functioning day and night by buying, trading, investing, planting, sewing, spinning, managing servants, extending charity, providing food for the family, and preparing for each season. Like any good poem, the purpose of this one is to draw attention to things often overlooked – in this case glory of the everyday.

Teach me, my God and King,
in all things thee to see;
and what I do in everything
to do it as for thee.

This communicates a sense of totality as the poet praises the everyday achievements of an upper-class Jewish wife, a woman who keeps her household functioning day and night by buying, trading, investing, planting, sewing, spinning, managing servants, extending charity, providing food for the family, and preparing for each season. Like any good poem, the purpose of this one is to draw attention to the often-overlooked glory of the everyday.

As a poem, Proverbs 31 should not be interpreted prescriptively as a job description for all women. Its purpose is to celebrate wisdom-in-action, not to instruct women everywhere to get married, have children, and take up the loom.

The “Target Audience” of Proverbs 31 is Men

The second thing you may not know about Proverbs 31 is that the “target audience” is men. In Jewish culture, it’s not the women who memorize Proverbs 31, but the men. They memorize it, to sing it as a song of praise to the women in their lives—their wives, daughters, sisters, mothers, and friends. Rachel Held Evans says “As I did more research, I learned that the only instructive language in the poem is directed at the poem’s intended male audience: “Praise her for all her hands have done.” And yet many Christians interpret this passage prescriptively, as a command to women rather than an ode to women, with the home-based endeavors of the Proverbs 31 woman cast as the ideal lifestyle for all women of faith. I was looking through a Google search of images on this passage and it became immediately clear to me that there has been a subtle repositioning of the poem’s intended audience from that of men to that of women.

GRAPHIC

You can do this for yourself at home and see what I mean.

Proverbs 31 is a song through which a man offers a woman praise; to interpret it as a task list through which a woman earns a man’s praise is to miss the point of the text entirely.

3. Proverbs 31 Celebrates Valor

The third thing you might not know about Proverbs 31 is that, I have read, the first line of the Proverbs 31 poem—“*a virtuous woman who can find?*”—is best translated, “*a woman of valor who can find?*” Think of John Bunyan, “Who would true valour see...” (The Hebrew is *eshet chayil*, “woman of valor”; the male equivalent is *gibor chayil*, “man of valor.”) It’s a fun fact! It’s something like a Jewish version of “You go, girl.” when we cheer a woman on doing something valiant like becoming a bishop or acts of mercy and justice, battles with cancer. We all know such women of valor. Valor isn’t about what you do, but how you do it.

So when we read Proverbs 31 as a way of celebrating those all those daily acts of faithfulness exhibited by the women in our lives we honour Scripture well because it better reflects the original intent of the author.

Now let me turn to the other great wisdom poem that we consider today – the one that opens the Book of Psalms. The: the Psalms have a wonderful capacity to capture the reality of our human experience. They express the emotions, personal feelings, attitudes, gratitude, and interests of the average individual. One reason people love the Psalms is that we can each usually identify the Psalms with our own experiences. The Psalms, like the other wisdom literature of the Old Testament (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes), is Hebrew poetry. Unlike English poetry,

which emphasizes rhyme and meter, Hebrew poetry relies on other characteristics for its impact.

Where English verse manipulates sound, and emphasizes rhyme and meter.

On the outer Barcoo where the churches are few
and the men of religion are scanty
On a road never crossed 'cept by folk that were lost
One Michael Magee had a shanty...

“I’ll sing you one, O! Green grow the rushes O!”
“What is your one O?”
“One is one and all alone and ever more shall be so.”

Hebrew poetry repeats and rearranges thoughts rather than sounds. For example the same thought of the first line is basically repeated in different words in the second line (3:1; 7:17).

Lord, now my adversaries have increased!
Many are rising up against me. (3:1)

I will give thanks to the Lord according to his righteousness
and will sing praise to the name of the Lord most high. (7.17)

Or it could be that the thought of the first line is emphasized by a contrasting thought in the second:

For the Lord knows the way of the righteous
but the way of the wicked shall perish. (1.6)

The young lions do lack and suffer hunger
But they who seek the Lord shall not be in want of any good thing. (34.10)

A third way is where—the second line explains or further develops the idea of the first line

They are like trees
planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.

It is a figure of speech as well, using a vivid image, a simile and a metaphor to communicate thoughts and feelings.

This first Psalm stands as a kind of introduction to the rest of the Psalms. It summarizes all that is to follow in the rest of the Psalms, and, for that matter, in the rest of Scripture.

Psalm one is a wisdom Psalm. There are praise Psalms, lament Psalms, and enthronement Psalms and all contain wisdom, of course, but as an introduction and door to the rest of the Psalms, this Psalm declares in just a few words some of the most basic but profound truths and propositions of the Bible.

Happy are those
who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,
or sit in the seat of scoffers;
but their delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law they meditate day and night.

They are like trees
planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.
The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.

It begins with the words, “O the blessedness”. In Hebrew it is a plural designed to emphasise the many blessings and happiness to those who fulfil the requirements marked out in this Psalm.

It is a beatitude – pronouncing a blessing on a certain group of people. Matthew begins his record of the teachings of Jesus in what is known as the Sermon on the Mount with a series of eight of these “Blessed are...” phrases. But here, in the Hebrew scriptures, in this introductory Psalm – a kind of gateway to the rest – is a beatitude which marks the quality of singular importance: here is the root; everything else is the fruit – the result of living close to God – “their delight is in the law of the Lord.” or, to follow the Hebrew word order, reflected in some English translations, “but rather, in the Law of the Lord (is) his delight”.

In Hebrew the word “delight” means “to be mindful of, attentive to” and so it came to mean “keep, protect”. When something delights us we become preoccupied with it and guard it. It can mean “to bend” or “incline toward” so it also includes

“desire, pleasure, inclination, satisfaction”. The Hebrew verb form of this noun is used several times of a man taking pleasure and or finding delight in the woman he loves, and so – just as one would read the love letters of a sweetheart, so we are to read and study God’s word with the same delight.

“They are like trees...” a tree has deep roots and is usually very sturdy. Trees portray stability and the capacity to withstand the storms of life – mental, emotional, spiritual stability in every kind of situation. Trees also speak of growth and time. It takes time for a huge gum tree to grow. True discipleship comes from a long-term established relationship with God. It speaks also of ministry – if a fruit tree, the tree gives fruit. If it is a huge manna gum or a MoretonBay fig, it gives shade. God has given us God’s Word so that we can become sturdy, established and fruitful trees in his God’s service and in ministry to others.

They are like trees firmly planted by streams of water.

I always think of those great pools of water in the Northern Territory and the billabongs and the huge manna gums along our rivers here in Australia. “To plant” means to take root, to become firmly established for the purposes of stability, nutrition, growth and production. The image also holds true for channels of water made for the purposes of irrigation and the planting of fruit trees near to them to promote growth and nutrition.

So the two passages from the wisdom literature of the Hebrew scriptures – one passage at the end of Proverbs, and the other from the beginning of the Book of Psalms teaches us about the basic tenets of life through the medium of poetry – to alert us to the wonder and the glory of the everyday things of life through a poem in praise of a woman of valour; and the other to point us to the the blessedness of those who, like trees planted by streams of water, delight in the Law of the Lord and meditate on it day and night.

The Christian scriptures from the epistle of James –although slow to be accepted into the canon of the New Testament and no scholars completely agreeing on when it was written – also draw on the wisdom tradition of the Jewish scriptures. It consists largely of moral exhortations and precepts, and today’s reading is no exception to that. “Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom,” it exhorts us. It also invites us to look to the source of the conflicts and disputes among us. In the gospel reading we here one of the great tenets of wisdom from Jesus the rabbi “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and the servant of all”. I think this morning, having concentrated mainly on the Jewish scriptures, it is sufficient to allow the gospel to speak for itself.

Alexander Scutt, St John’s Bentleigh, 23 September 2018