

The Virtuous

Proverbs 31:10-31; Mark 9:30-37

For the poster advertising this morning's service about, 'The Virtuous', I used a picture of a handful of rubies. If you know your Muriel Spark, you'll know why.

*"Marcia Blaine School for Girls was a day school which had been partially endowed in the middle of the nineteenth century by the wealthy widow of an Edinburgh book-binder...Her manly portrait hung in the great hall, and was honoured every Founder's Day by a bunch of hard-wearing flowers such as chrysanthemums or dahlias. These were placed in a vase beneath the portrait, upon a lectern which also held an open Bible with the text underlined in red ink, **'Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies.'**"*

The Bible passage from the Old Testament Book of Proverbs was the motto of the fictional school written about by Muriel Spark where Miss Jean Brodie, in her prime, taught.

Along with Psalm 23's, The Lord's my Shepherd, and John's Gospel, "In my Father's house are many rooms", this Bible passage is often used at funeral services. However, this is a text for the living, and not simply to be used at funerals. The figure of Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs is female. So here this virtuous woman, or capable wife in some translations, is literally a woman 'of strength', a 'woman of worth'; even in a 'warrior-like woman.' The poem comes at the conclusion of the Book of Proverbs, and this woman's behaviour summarizes the virtues of the wise that this whole Old Testament book promulgates, whether you are a woman or a man.

It is important to say that this portrayal is *not* the only portrayal of womanhood, *nor* is it saying that this kind of domestic role model is the only norm for half of humanity. It's not a portrayal of some kind of more spiritual Mary Berry or Nigella Lawson: making your own clothing; getting up

in the middle of the night to get everyone else going; taking care of the family business; working into the night; and, oh yes, having something to give to those in need; always being strong and dignified; having something profound to say; and also laughing a little and not taking yourself too seriously. And do all of this with a reverence for God.

What I believe it *is* saying is here is one kind of strong woman, in this particular role, in her own right, and *not* being compared to a man. Here is a virtuous woman, with qualities and capability, with courage and strength, with power and with blessing to offer a family, or the marketplace, or the whole city, or the wider world.

In these verses Wisdom, God's Wisdom, speaks about the qualities of this woman which include integrity, industry, creativity and compassion. Here is a woman of substance in her community, respected inside and outside her home for what she does and who she is. That is to be celebrated, the virtuous woman, the Wisdom of God personified.

Maybe you think it surprising to find this in the pages of the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament, but there it is. The question is not simply why is it there; but why has it been ignored? And in many places, why is it still being ignored when in our world today there remains a crying need for women, and men, of virtue like this.

The United Nations Women's organisation strongly supports women's equal participation in all aspects of life, focusing on four strategic priorities:

- *Women lead, participate and benefit equally from governance systems*
- *Women have income security, decent work and economic autonomy*
- *All women and girls live a life free from all forms of violence*
- *Women and girls contribute to and have greater influence in building sustainable peace and resilience, and benefit equally from the prevention of natural disasters and conflicts and humanitarian action.*

If you are surprised at finding the passage in the Old Testament with its definition of one form of strong women, is it any less surprising that the United Nations, *still*, has the need to lead a campaign for societal change across the world.

And then you read about the actions of the Taleban in Afghanistan, severely curtailing the rights of women there, things which happen in different countries too. And then you read about the alleged accusations against the late owner of Harrods. And then you read about women being human trafficked into domestic servitude, or nail bars and beauty salons, or the sex industry. And then you read about inequality in wages, and in pensions. And if you are a woman here today, maybe from your own experience you can point to times of being passed over, patronized, taken for granted, abused or in some way diminished.

Here is a woman in the Bible not ultimately defined by her marital status, but by her virtue and her qualities. This particular woman rises early not because of subordination but because of her determination. She helps her partner not because power is held over her but because her character is trustworthy and her work fruitful. Her business flourishes because of her initiative and creativity. Her generosity is not coerced but reflects her kind heart for needy strangers as well as, in this instance, her own children. She is energetic and strong because of her self-discipline. She is not an add-on or a slave but a true partner. She embodies the prosperous one that we sang about earlier in Psalm 1:

*They flourish like well-watered trees
Set by a riverside,
Whose fruit matures, whose leaves remain –
They prosper and abide.*

As one commentator writes: 'Her goodness compels all to respect and reward her. Her virtues shine through the confining social structures of her world and impresses the fear of the Lord upon all who know her, regardless of their stations in life.'ⁱ

And if I may say for the purposes of equality for women *and* men, Wisdom may be defined as a life well lived, a life that matters. Wisdom in the Bible is not simply enlightenment. Rather it is a lifetime of service and support and compassion, faith put into action, because we love, since God first loved us. Wisdom is a way of life that includes justice, righteousness, humility, compassion, and fairness. This is something that surely applies to both women and men.ⁱⁱ Not all of these virtuous traits and characteristics and accomplishments will be found in one person. For anyone here today, beating herself up, or himself up because she or he cannot be, 'all things to all people', hear what this Bible passage says to you. Here are some of the ways human beings can work together for the common good. Here are some of the tasks that we together, women and men, can do for our families, our friends, our communities, our country, our Church. Virtue shared; virtue enacted.

As one writer puts it, nurturing families can be stressful, lonely work. It is work not limited to one gender. It is work for women and men to take on together. Envisioning the future can be stressful, lonely work. It is work not limited to one gender. It is work for women and men to take on together. Making wise use of the resources available to us can be stressful, lonely work. It is work not limited to one gender. It is work for women and men to take on together. Caring for the hurting and broken of the world can be stressful, lonely work. It is work not limited to one gender. It is work for women and men to take on together.

This passage not only praises women it presses us to think about the partnerships between women and men in the work of the community. It is not about the solitary virtues of one person, but rather a shining pointer to the interdependence of partnership and the contours of community.ⁱⁱⁱ Wisdom is to be sought like a precious stone, like rubies.

In Mark's Gospel, in Capernaum, Jesus intervenes in an argument amongst His followers about who was more important. Was it between men and men, or women and women, or men and women? We assume men, but it doesn't actually say. What Jesus does in that home, where women and men must have been present, and children, was to take a little child, it doesn't really matter if it was a boy or a girl, and said, *"Whosoever shall receive one of such children in My name, receiveth Me: and whosoever shall receive Me, receiveth not Me, but Him that sent Me."*

The virtuous are those who in humility, grace, compassion and love welcome and nurture all who are vulnerable, all who are hungry, all who are thirsty, all who are marginalised, all who are powerless, all who are naked, and all who need love. Women and men.

For the value, the price of such people, is far above rubies.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Telford Work, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 4, p76*

ⁱⁱ Kenneth H Carter Jr, *ibid*

ⁱⁱⁱ H James Hopkins, *ibid, pps 77-79*