

# St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

## SERVING AND LISTENING

9<sup>th</sup> Aug 2015

Proverbs 31:10-31

Mark 9:30-37

Before we were married and for a year or so afterwards as well, Alan worked as an organist at Warriston Crematorium in Edinburgh. A crematorium organist has to sit through an awful lot of funerals, of course, and play the same hymns many times. In those days in Edinburgh, if the undertakers could not get hold of the parish minister to take a funeral, they very often called on a certain retired minister, who had better remain nameless, though he has long had his own funeral and gone to his reward. This minister had a set funeral service which he always used, with slight variations depending on if the deceased was a man or a woman. Indeed the crematorium staff heard this service so often that they were able to make a verbatim copy and keep it in case a minister did not turn up and one of them would be called on to officiate! The female version of the service included the passage we read this morning from the book of Proverbs, the passage about the good wife.

I can see why he used this passage, because very often when I visit a family whom I don't know to organise a wife and mother's funeral, and ask about the woman who has died the first thing – sometimes almost the only thing – that they say is “She was a good wife and mother.” And here we have a description of a good wife and mother! So what could be better, surely at least parts of it will be relevant!

I don't know about the other women here this morning, but as a woman, this reading from Proverbs makes me tired! It reminds me, as almost nothing else in the Bible can, that a woman's work is never done! I read this and I wonder what on earth the husband was doing? While she is rising early, and cooking weaving, planting, organising, buying and selling, what is he up to? Was he just sitting around eating the results of her work, sheltered by the work of her hands and enjoying status and wealth which his wife has earned for him? I hope not! And we are not told, of course. In fact this passage comes in the context of advice from an unknown King Lemuel to his son. It is advice about finding the best kind of wife, and as such it is an ideal picture of all the things a good wife might do, not a prescription that a good wife should do them all.

I hope, ladies, that this is a relief to you. Reading this passage in church this morning does not give your husbands, if you have one, the right to go home and expect that you suddenly begin to do even more than you already do to make his life comfortable! This is not a job description against which a wife is measured to see if she passes or fails. Gets up early, check. Provides food, check. Buys a field, still on the to do list. Clothes household in scarlet and purple, hmm, not sure they want that. Opens her mouth with wisdom, oh yes, check that! No, it is not a list for women to measure themselves against, fortunately.

What I hope it can be, for the gentlemen, especially the husbands, is a reminder to look at all that the women in your life do for you, and give them some appreciation! This ideal wife's ideal husband does at least recognise her unique talents and her hard work. Not that men don't do things too, of course, but life in a marriage, indeed life in society, is about partnership between men and women. And everyone needs a bit of appreciation now and then.

There doesn't seem much connection at first sight between this ideal wife's description and the little story about Jesus and his disciples. But there is, and it comes with the ending of the verses from Proverbs, where the writer says "Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised." At the end of the long list of things a good wife might be thanked for or praised for, the writer knows that one thing above all is important and that is that a woman – in this case, but it is just as important for men – should fear the Lord. Fear, not in quaking senseless in your boots, but in the sense of respecting and honouring God in all of life. And that is the connection; our attitude to God which will colour our attitude to everything else in life.

The disciples don't come off well in this little story that Mark tells us. As so often, we see them not understanding what Jesus is talking about. And reading the passage, as we have this morning, we might wonder what they found so hard to understand. It seems plain enough to us. But of course that is partly because we are reading with hindsight. The twelve disciples have been hearing Jesus teach the crowds in parables. Earlier Mark has told us that he did not speak to the crowd except in parables, although he privately explained them to his disciples. (Mark 4:34) Sometimes it must have been hard for the disciples to work out when Jesus was talking plainly and when he was not. Moreover they were not expecting to hear what he said. Many Jews might be expecting a Messiah, but death, being killed, was no part of what they expected to happen to a Messiah, no part of the Messianic plan. You might as well expect a prime footballer, Ronaldo or Messi, to explain to his team-mates that he is going to win this match for them by playing with his legs tied together. The team-mates would not take it literally – it must be a metaphor for some secret way of playing football. Likewise what Jesus is saying must, the disciples thought, be a secret way of telling them something which the Messiah would do, something unimaginably great and triumphant.

No wonder Jesus gets frustrated with them. He has told them plainly what is going to happen and all they can do is squabble about places at a putative court. Last week we talked about how when we follow Jesus it should not be about what we can get out of it. It should not be about ourselves at all. But here we have the disciples showing us how easy it is for us humans to think about ourselves.

Sometimes it is not easy to hear what God is saying to us, but sometimes God is speaking loudly and clearly and we simply find it hard to listen properly, and so hear clearly, because we are not listening with our whole attention. The disciples were distracted thinking about royal courts and orders of priority, and so they could not hear what Jesus was telling them in words of one syllable. We too get distracted by what we hope to hear, or fear to hear – because sometimes when God brings us good news, we don't believe that either - or by what we expect to hear. Our very sense of ourselves can get in the way of our understanding. But our listening to God should not be about us, but about him.

And so Jesus knocks that self-importance on the head, he gets his followers' attention by turning their ideas upside down. In his kingdom, he says the most important people will be the servants, those who put themselves out for others, those who do not think of themselves, those who no one else looks up to. And he places a child among them. A child, one of the least important people in that world. A child, with no rights, no opinion worth hearing, no rank, no understanding. In His kingdom, he says, the best welcome should be given to people like this child, the least important. And why? Because how we treat the least important shows how we think of Jesus. If we welcome them, not for what they can give or bring, but for themselves, then we are welcoming Jesus and in Jesus even his Father as well.

“A woman who fears God is to be praised” says the writer of Proverbs. “Whoever welcomes a child like this in my name, welcomes me.” says Jesus. It comes down to the same thing. All that the ideal good wife does is made valuable, not in itself, but because she does it out of honour and respect for God. She does not do it to gain the praise of her husband and her children, or of the watching world, but because this is how God has called her to live, in the service of others. The good person is not doing this or her good deeds in order to be better than everyone else. In God's service we are not in competition.

In God's service our lives are not about us at all, but about God. God sent his Son who said that he had come “not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.” And it is he who we say that we follow. Some people in their service achieve a lot: they are like that idea wife in Proverbs who leave people gasping at all that they do. In my last parish there was one woman whom I spent quite a bit of time with as her sight and then her health generally deteriorated. She had led an adventurous life, much of it in Burma, and then in her retirement had also been very busy with various activities and charities. After her funeral, when her children had spoken of all that she had done, another woman who had lived all her life in the same village – and was, incidentally, the salt of the earth - said to me “Oh dear, what will they say at my funeral? What have I done?” But God does not value people for the variety of things that they do. God values us for ourselves, and he wants us to value other people that way as well, not for what they do or what they can bring, not for anything other than that they are made in His image. God is pleased with us when we welcome the unimportant, when we treat everyone as being as important as God himself is, when we forget any importance which the world may give to us.

In a world of rank and consequence, that is not easy. Some people do more than other, some are morally better behaved than others, some are simply more likeable than others. And that is before we get into the human constructs of rank and wealth and celebrity which give people importance in the eyes of the world. It is not easy to give as much attention to those who are less interesting, to those who do not seem to appreciate you and your time, to those with whom you have very little in common. But that is what we are called on to do. We are called on to accept even, especially, those who we think of as being least important to us, having least impact on our lives, just as we would the most important. Because it is not about us. It is about Jesus. Amen.