

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – 20 September 2009

*Proverbs 31:10-31 James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a Mark 9:30-37*

Today's readings remind me of two old sayings which I often reflect upon: a woman's work is never done and there is no rest for the wicked. Considering much of the work I do and my often state of tiredness, it leads me to think that perhaps I was meant to be a most wicked woman.

Even so, today's readings also raise some interesting, if not significant, questions:

What is your idea of greatness?

What is your idea of being capable?

What is your idea of wisdom?

What is your idea of God?

My idea of a perfect sermon would be to leave it there and sit down. Nevertheless, my inner wicked woman compels me to delve further.

What *is* your idea of greatness?

I wonder is that connected to 'What do you want to be when you grow up?'

My first memories of what I wanted to be when I grew up was to be a dustman (or garbage collector as I think the current term is). A couple of years' later I decided I wanted to be a magician. Then for the next several years I wanted to be a school teacher, before finally settling upon deciding I wanted to be a physician or surgeon. Fortunately, or unfortunately, as the case may be – especially for those requiring surgery – somehow I ended up with this notion that whatever I did, I was meant to be a priest.

As a teenager I took this quite seriously, even to the point that during boring sermons I would consult the most important parts of the prayer book, namely, the Athanasian Creed, the Table of Kindred and Affinity, and the Thirty-Nine Articles. It was through my reading of the Thirty-Nine Articles that I decided that, if I became a priest, I could never accept a knighthood; although I could accept a life-peerage. As yet, this an honour with which I have not had to grapple.

And so, until I grow up, I enjoy being part dustman, part magician, part teacher, part physician, and, most of all, being a priest.

But enough of me, what about you: what do you want to be when you grow up?

To what do you aspire?

And where fits, in your scheme of things of things, greatness, capability, wisdom, and God?

Today's readings offer you and me a smorgasbord of options.

The capable wife of our first reading from the Book of Proverbs, is really a song about holy wisdom. Another, and possibly better, translation is 'strong woman'. The Book of Proverbs is, obviously, all about wisdom, and this is a personification of that wisdom which 'is far more precious than jewels'.

In our culture and society, it seems that all too often cleverness is more eagerly sought after than wisdom. Cleverness seems to me to be a cheap form of pretend wisdom. Wisdom is only something which comes through learned experience, often through hard experience.

This is what I think our second reading is about. Holy wisdom – the wisdom from above – is pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. These are qualities you can't pick up from reading or hearing about or knowing, they can only emerge from the experience of living in the real world, and being knocked around a bit along the way.

What is your idea of greatness?

What is your idea of being capable, or strong?

What is your idea of wisdom?

What is your idea of God?

And so we come to our Gospel passage for today. Imagine if you will, that our Lord has taken on us a train trip to end of Zone 2, perhaps Craigieburn. We've had a fun train trip with lots of interesting experiences along the way. He's given us a hint that it will soon be time to turn around and head back to town and his kingdom is not too far away. He's also hinted a couple of times that when we get back there's going to be trouble, but we've not really taken much notice of that bit.

He and his closest companions have just had a significant mystical experience on a nearby hill and while they've been up there we've been discussing something really important: who's going to be greatest in this new kingdom.

Gosh, over 2,000 years, how things have changed and stayed the same!

Now comes the tricky bit. Jesus grabs a nearby child and says 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'

Welcoming in this context carries the protocols of formal hospitality and children in this context were not to be counted.

Jesus is actually saying that whoever welcomes the least, the lowest, the most marginalised, welcomes God. That is, God is among us as the least of us.

This is still, 2,000 years later, a concept we find hard to grasp, hard to deal with, and hard to realise. While debates go on and on and on about whether God exists or who should or shouldn't be welcome in the Church, God stands here and there among us like a neglected child.

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