

PENTECOST 17B, 19-09-2021 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Proverbs 31.10-31; Psalm 1; James 3.1-12; Mark 9.30-37

*They went on from there and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, 'The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.' But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'*

I don't choose which Bible readings we hear during our services here; in accordance with Anglican tradition we use a Lectionary, which follows a three-year series.

If preachers are allowed to pick and choose, we might leave out parts of the Bible that are more difficult or that we don't like or understand well. Using the lectionary means that each Sunday there are set sections from the Old and New Testaments, the Gospels, and a Psalm and it's my responsibility to make what I can of them, doing my best to discover what God wants to say to us today through the scripture.

Today's Old Testament reading is a bit hard to take for an old feminist like me. At least our translation has sorted out the language a bit: the old Revised Standard Version translates

Proverbs 31 verse 1 as: "A good wife who can find?

She is far more precious than jewels"

rather than a *capable* wife; although the Hebrew word can also mean strong or worthy.

This 'ideal woman' works all day and all night, spinning and weaving and sewing, buying and selling, planting and harvesting, making clothes, cooking, organising the house, caring for the children, keeping her husband happy- I'm exhausted just thinking about it!

This is a husband's idea of what a good wife should be like. It is meant to be an idealised portrait because nobody could really live up to it, even if they wanted to.

In a similar vein, today's Psalm describes the ideal good man. Again, our translation has tidied up the language and says, 'Happy are those', but older versions say,

"Blessed is the man

who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,

nor stands in the way of sinners,

nor sits in the seat of scoffers;

but his delight is in the law of the Lord,

and on his law he meditates day and night." (RSV)

The ancient writer would not have imagined a woman meditating on the law, because most girls were not taught to read.

The chapter from the letter of James we heard is addressed to the 'brothers'; our translation has added 'sisters' to include everyone. James could hardly have imagined women becoming teachers; and there are still some Christians who believe that women should not teach men, but only children or other women.

James gives a stern warning to teachers and preachers to watch how they speak and what they say because everybody makes mistakes: I hope you forgive me when I do!

When we get to Mark's Gospel, we hear that Jesus had been teaching the disciples that he was going to be killed. They didn't understand, but instead of asking him to explain, they argued about which one of them was the greatest.

It sounds very childish, doesn't it? 'I'm the oldest!' 'Yes, but I'm the cleverest!' 'Maybe, but he likes me the most!' 'Well I think I should be the boss!'

Jesus responded by telling them that the way to be first is to put yourself last and serve the others- just as he would later, when he washed their feet during the Last Supper.

To illustrate this, he took a little child and said, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me- and therefore the one who sent me."

Jesus is talking about more than being kind to children. He is talking about welcoming and caring for those who are least able to do anything for you in return- the helpless, weak, poor, and powerless ones, exemplified by this small child.

Children, in those days, had a similar status to that of slaves or servants: they had no money or power, or ability to contribute to the household.

They weren't very important- their parents might love them, of course, but they weren't worth much to anyone else.

Jesus told his followers to welcome such as these, and not only that- to BE like them.

That means not arguing about who's the greatest or the best or the top dog, but instead rejecting the whole concept of status, and the power that accompanies it.

According to Jesus, the greatest one is the one who serves. This is markedly different to the way our society operates. How much do we value those who serve others? If you consider the wages paid to carers, cleaners, paramedics, nurses, child-care, and age-care workers- and if their pay is an indication of their worth- then we don't value them nearly enough. What about wait staff and shop assistants, and all those on casual wages with little or no security? How much do we value them?

How much do we value those in leadership roles in our church community?

We see servant leadership in action in our parish, for which we give thanks to God. Being a warden, parish councillor, treasurer, secretary, synod representative, liturgical assistant or Lay Pastoral Minister carries little status, not much power and NO pay, but people do it cheerfully and willingly. (*Mostly, anyway!*)

Leadership in the church must always be about service. A priest is given authority at ordination to preach the word of God, to administer the sacraments and to absolve sins; but authority must never be mistaken for power over others. Priests are told to clothe themselves in humility.

So what does God want us to hear today? There are two main points. The first reminds us that we need to value and to welcome all who are weak, vulnerable and of low status in the world- the poor, refugees, the disabled, and of course children.

The second reminds us that the church only exists to serve others- not just ourselves. It has been said that the church is the only organisation that exists for the benefit of non-members.

If a church simply provides worship and fellowship for its members where is its mission? How are we sharing the good news of God's love outside these walls?

How can we best serve, here in the parish of Carine-Duncraig?

The Lord be with you.