

20 September 2015 Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Proverbs 31: 10-31

Psalm 1

James 3: 1-12

Mark 9:30-37

[Proper 20B/Ordinary 25B/Pentecost 17 September 20, 2015](#) Textweek

Last week, rather than look at the actual content of the texts we explored the readings as if we were browsing through different TV channels and so seeing the readings as small parts of different programs as we switched channels; that gave us an opportunity to break free from the baggage of 'bible readings'.

Today, again rather than focussing on the detail of the text there is another good opportunity for us to look again with a broader perspective and discover that bible readings are not 'absolute' but rather are 'relative'; relative to the reader, the time and the place in which they are being read.

We can also discover that one of the outcomes of reading ancient texts is to both see and appreciate the movements in humanity toward enlightenment and toward wholeness.

"A capable wife who can find?" A literal appreciation of the first reading from Proverbs would have been acceptable, meaningful and true within the context of the time and place of its writing. It was initially addressed to an audience who would have nodded in full appreciation of the definition of *"a capable wife"*; but that was around 400BCE, so nearly 2,500 years ago.

What is quite sobering is that the images in today's service sheet are from the 1950s and they reflect the very same values, qualities and understanding; the role, or place of the *"capable wife"* had not evolved.

Certainly since the 1950s there has been a movement toward a different understanding of the value, nature, role and the 'being' of both wife and women in many, mostly western, societies. And in the 23 countries that have reached the enlightenment of same-sex marriage the idea of *"a capable wife"* is no longer gender specific.

So what do these changes illustrate for us in relation to our faith, our understanding of the scriptures and our theology, our appreciation of God?

Archaeology can take us back to a primitive pre-language understanding of husband and wife relationships; where role definition was very much established by need and physical response. In the primitive landscape of cave-dwellers men would take on the role of the hunter and women the role of family care. The evolving 'civilisation' of humanity carried this understanding, or pattern of behaviour, forward and thereby normalised it.

In parallel with the evolving civilisation of humankind, the spiritual quest to realise that longing that leads us to God took shape in various religious traditions; and each tradition created stories that affirmed the understanding of being human that had quite naturally evolved and developed over time.

In that process, of civilising humanity, and with the primitively established role definitions already in place, it was the men who wrote the stories that served to explain the normalised nature of life.

And so to Adam and Eve, the archetypal story of our Christian tradition; however rather than the absolute (and so final) word of the literalists, this story embodies an understanding that is contextualised in a time of primitive understanding.

The enlightened teachings of Christ reveal, or seek to reveal a very different reality to that early primitive understanding, and if taken equally literally they completely overturn or reverse the Old Testament ordering of life.

In today's gospel we hear "*Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all*"; so much for patriarchy; according to this teaching it is the 1950s dishwasher who is the first, the pre-eminent and the almighty one.

Temple, Synagogue and Church have all somehow managed to miss this realisation of Christ's enlightenment; and much of humanity's civilising process has been Church driven and Church influenced. There are however other disciplines and influences and the sciences have also given shape and form to our understanding of the world.

Men and women may have been initially defined by physical genitalia, but the sciences have introduced us to the concept of masculinity and femininity, characteristics of male and female that go beyond gender and that speak of a more integrated wholeness.

When we re-read the scriptures, and look again at "*a capable wife*"; without a definition of marriage as the ordering of man and woman for the purpose of procreation, we find a deeper layer of understanding even in the most primitive of stories.

We are each in our wholeness both Adam and Eve, and that leads us to an appreciation of integration rather than enslavement.

We are each tempted by the tree of life and also ready to deny that temptation in the face of God.

And we are each "*a capable wife*" as much as we are also "*heart of her husband*".

The "*capable wife*" is called forth in our baptism for the "*capable wife*" is another defining characteristic of Christ that fully resonates with 'The Good Shepherd' and "The Suffering Servant".

Arguably the Church Fathers saw themselves only in the role of 'husband', "*known in the city gates, taking his seat among the elders of the land*"; but Christ sheds new light on such a primitive theology.

When, only when, we can see beyond marriage as an intimate partnership uniting a man and a woman to facilitate procreation, will we be able to appreciate and realise a deeper understanding of humanity and of relationships.

The gospels lead us into deeper understandings enabling us to find in Adam and Eve a relational understanding that point us toward integration and wholeness, and lead us into an appreciation of husband and wife that is relationally based rather than procreation based.

Marriage itself becomes a symbol for unity, integration and wholeness and a microcosm of humanity itself; it illuminates a being together that leads us into the community of all humanity.

“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Galatians 3:28

The more we apprehend the Scriptures within the context of a worldview that also acknowledges the understandings and insights of the sciences, and the more we listen to the teachings of Christ without carrying forward previous Old Testament baggage, the more we can see and appreciate that life and life’s Divine call are still very much unfolding.

And perhaps today, we can put aside our rubbishing of the writer of proverbs, and put aside a criticism of Paul who seemed often to echo the same; and embrace the Christ-likeness of “*a capable wife*”.

And then we might also see ourselves in that same icon; knowing that “*a capable wife*” is to found in male and female alike.