

SERMON: 2018/09/09 (16th Sunday aft. Pentecost, Yr. B - Track 1) - *Proverbs* 22:1-2,8-9,22-23; *Psalms* 125 & *Mark* 7:24-37

[Invite children to the front.]

In the gospels - those four "biographies" by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John about our Savior, Jesus - there *seems* to be two kinds of people (living in the "Holy Land").

Firstly, there was "the Jews," [n.1] who thought that they were *always* the "good guys" - the "heroes," the "centre of the universe;" and, secondly, there are some others called, "Gentiles," which was a smaller group.

And these two different "tribes" didn't get along:

Oh no!

The Jews of that time were very proud of their special status as the descendants of that wonderful man, Abraham, and they '*hated*' people who weren't like them - people like us. [n.2]

Now, there was some good reason for them to be suspicious and resentful of the "Gentiles": Gentiles like the Greeks and the Romans had conquered them - beaten them in battle - and tried to force different customs and habits on "the Jews."

But, ultimately, the problem was that "the Jews" were *racist*, xenophobic.

They thought they were superior not because of anything that they had done but just because of who they were (related to); their country.

And this is nonsense!

And some people still believe this sort of thing today; that they are just better because of their skin color or the type of hair they've got, or because of where they were born.

(It is a timeless sin, one many of us are guilty of.)

And Jesus had no time for this sort of thing; He wouldn't tolerate it.

One day, a Gentile woman came and asked for His help, and to prove how silly the racism of his friends was, He pretended at first not to care - to play what's called "the devil's advocate." [n.3]

But then He performed a wonderful miracle to bless her and her daughter, to show, 'more vividly', that He wants *everyone* to know and experience the goodness of God. [n.4]

(He was, after all, when He did this, in her home-town, beyond the traditional borders of Jewish land. He hadn't gone there by mistake. 'He 'went' there on purpose [7:24]: to bring the love of God to the whole world.)

Let's pray: Father God, we pray that, by Your Holy Spirit, you would help us be *impartial*^[n.5] in our relationships and in our attitudes to others; that we wouldn't judge others by how they look or where they're from, and that, instead, we would show your merciful kindness to everyone, in Jesus' name, amen.

[Ask children to leave.]

Proverbs is another very unusual book in the Bible.

Like *Song of Songs*, it is attributed to David's son, Solomon, one of the early, important, kings of Israel, but, *unlike* it - remember that I said (last week) the *Song* may be the only book in the Old Testament written by a woman^[n.6] - *Proverbs* could very well have been authored by him.

Certainly, this is the traditional view of the Church; and the likelihood of at least the first nine chapters having been composed by anybody other than him is 'extremely low'.^[n.7] [Pause.]

I say that it is unusual - in comparison with the other texts we're likely more familiar with - because it has no *narrative*. That is to say, it doesn't recount a chronological sequence of events - like episodes from someone's life or reign. It doesn't describe thrilling battles or clandestine intrigue.

We don't hear about adventures in the desert, or about the miracles of a God-anointed prophet.

Even *Deuteronomy* and *Leviticus*, which, by their titles, are supposed to be *all* about laws and rules consist of more than just lists of things that godly people are supposed to do or to abstain from.

In those, we're offered *context*: they begin by telling us *where* the words were spoken and to *whom*.

And this is important.

It gives us assurance - assurance of their authority; knowing the provenance, makes all the difference.

Doesn't it?

It matters whether we're hearing from Daniel or Daffy Duck; from Goofy or from God.

One name makes me sit up and listen.

The other means that I dismiss it, laugh it off.

Now, *Solomon* was reputed to be exceedingly clever, shrewd.

In *1 Kings*, as we heard not so long ago, we're told that he was endowed with a supernatural sharpness of mind by the Creator Himself ^[3:9-15].

And, in the popular imagination, wisdom is his defining characteristic.

In my own mind, I picture those old fashioned black and white woodcuts of him, sitting in his throne, a fancy, ornate crown on his head, adjudicating between people feuding over some especially complex, opaque issue.

He's almost a Sherlock Holmes type, isn't he?
Or an Archimedes.

The most famous case that he solved, of course, was between two women who were both claiming custody of the same baby: [v.16-27].

Now, the picture that is "painted" for us is a very bleak, multilayered one - and this is significant:

the answer wasn't going to be obvious to *ordinary* men.

The situation in which the birth took place was a brothel, where, in an era long before the invention of reliable contraception, we are to assume, with good reason, that unplanned pregnancies were *extremely* common, and many children lived in close proximity to one-another and to their mothers, not knowing which of their peers might be relatives, siblings or half-siblings.

And where such questions were probably of little, normal concern.

This was, after all, a hand-to-mouth existence.

These women are '*prostitutes*' [v.16], not (high-class) "concubines" (of the palace). Their work was shameful, marginalizing.

The last refuge, probably, of the poorest of the poor; of widows and the sick.

There isn't paperwork.

No bureaucrats to ask to delve into any records.

And certainly no DNA-testing to do.

So, how to discern who the child's mother *really* was?

Solomon decides on a ruse; to 'divide' the boy in equal halves with 'a sword'; [v. 24-25] to give each plaintiff a fair portion - fraction - of him.

The suggestion is an *appalling* one, but it elicits the most natural reaction from the one who truly cares about her baby's fate - his biological mother, and she offers to allow the pretender to possess him in his entirety.

Case solved!

It was a *pragmatic* solution to a difficult problem.

And indeed, *Proverbs*, since it consists, supposedly, of his sayings, seems to be *solely* concerned with "being realistic;" with common-sense; seeing things as they really are and calling a spade a spade.

Is that a saying here?

People used to say it all the time (back home) in Yorkshire.

It was almost their mantra;

their motto.

They prided themselves on being "down to earth."

On being a practical, no nonsense people.

It was supposed to define them as northern English, as opposed to the fancy, pretentious, vain southerners.

And is this what we're meant to take away from this book?
To make "the sensible" our idol?
Our priority?
Our "god"?

If that were your conclusion, I wouldn't blame you.
The word 'prudent' appears *five* times in *Proverbs*, and it isn't a very long book!
Undoubtedly, this seems to be its *key* theme.
Which is interesting, because, to the contrary, doesn't Saint Paul say that the Gospel is *foolishness*?
He does: *1 Corinthians* 1:18.
In fact, he uses it *six* times: [v.18, 20, 21, 23, 25, 27].
And isn't that fascinating?
Because he gives no other sign in the epistle that he is directly responding to *Proverbs*; that he was *consciously* seeking to counter it; to match it "blow-for-blow;" that he had it open on his writing-desk beside him as a theological mirror.
Nothing of the kind.

But this also seems like more than a coincidence: are we seeing the hand of a God?
It's like we have, on the one hand, Alice, and on the other, her reflection in the "looking glass" - that portal into a strange topsy-turvy world of talking, giant chess-pieces and riddling Cheshire cats.
And the question we should ask ourselves is: "Where is the Christian to make his or her home?"
We are, after all, called upon to live like we are already 'away...with the Lord'[2 Cor. 5:8]; that we are merely "sojourners" here, pilgrims travelling through to a better place; in *Philippians* 3:20, we hear that 'our citizenship is in heaven'.

We are, then, on a strange 'adventure' of our own.[n.8]
And it is significant that 'the world in which Alice finds herself is a very dangerous [one], with a great deal of death, negligence, and uncertainty.'[n.9] It is, despite its name[n.10], a murderous, callous, deceptive, 'insane' place[n.11] - just like our reality, really, a 'Mad World': [Gary Jules (2001), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4N3N1MlvVc4>].
And, this being the truth, naivety, then, will be the ruin of the Church; 'so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves', teaches Jesus: [10:16].
This is the answer.[n.12]
And it is to uncomfortably inhabit an in-between country of constant, irresolvable tension.
But then, that is where we are.
So, as the Psalmist reminded us this morning, praise God that '[t]he scepter of the wicked shall not hold sway [forever]';[125:3]:

For the nails that held Christ to the cross, were the very ones taken from the door holding (the real) Wonderland shut; and it nows stands (*wide*) open to 'the just'.

Footnotes:

1. John, in particular, uses this term with *great* frequency in his gospel, e. g.: 1:19; 2:18,20; 3:1; 4:22; 5:1,10,15,16,18; 6:4,41,52; 7:1,11,13,15,35; 8:22,31,48,52,57; 9:18,22; 10:19,22, etc.
2. See: Edersheim, Alfred (1899), *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah in Two Volume: Vol. I*, Eighth Edition, New York, N. Y.: Longmans, Green, & Co., 67 & 91.
3. See: France, R. T. (2002), *The Gospel of Mark (The New International Greek Testament Commentary)*, Grand Rapids, M. I.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company / Carlisle, U. K.: The Paternoster Press, 296.
4. *Ibid.*
5. See today's "Back to School" Bible-study on the importance of impartiality in *James 2*.
6. LaCocque, André and Ricoeur, Paul (1998), *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies*, David Pellauer (Trans.), Chicago, I. L.: The University of Chicago Press, 243.
7. Steinmann, Andrew E. (December 2000), 'Proverbs 1-9 As A Solomonic Composition', *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Volume 43, No. 4, pp. 659-674, 674.
8. Hauerwas, Stanley and Willimon, William H. (1989), *Resident Aliens: A Provocative Christian Assessment of Culture and Ministry for People who Know that Something is Wrong*, Nashville, T. N.: Abingdon Press, 11.
9. Taliaferro, Charles and Olson, Elizabeth (2010), 'Serious Nonsense', in Irwin, William and Davis, Richard Brian (Eds.), *Alice in Wonderland and Philosophy: Curiouser and Curiouser*, Hoboken, N. J.: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., pp. 183-196, 190.
10. "Wonderland."
11. Taliaferro, Charles and Olson, Elizabeth (2010), 190.
12. Kidner, Derek (2008), *Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Volume 17)*, Downers Grove, I. L.: InterVarsity Press, 30: 'Proverbs is concerned to point out that what is right and what pays may travel long distances together, but its leaves us in no doubt which we are to follow when their paths diverge.'

