

SERMON: 2018/09/23 (18th Sunday aft. Pentecost, Yr. B - Track 1) - *Proverbs* 31:10-31 & *Mark* 9:30-37

[Invite children to the front.]

Have you ever been *to the circus*?
Yes or no?

[Wait for replies.]

Well, what happens there?
What makes the circus so special?

[Wait for response.]

Yes!
That's right.
But how does an evening at the circus begin?
Let me tell you:

The people - the men and women, the boys and girls - they arrive outside the "Big Top" - the large, round, stripy tent - and they form a queue, don't they?
And somebody in a colourful wooden booth - maybe a gypsy with big golden, hooped earrings - sells them a paper ticket each, which is torn to show that they've paid.

Then they're ushered inside, one by one, to find a seat.
Perhaps some clowns entertain them as the crowd files in.
Finally, the lights go dark.
Only one remains, and it shines on a man in a tall, black hat.
And a waistcoat.
He has a thin, waxed moustache; and in one hand he carries a shiny silver-topped cane, and in his other hand is a microphone.
And do you know what he says?
In a loud voice he says, "*Laydeees and gentle-men, welcur...m to the greatest. show. on. earth!*"

And everyone shouts and cheers and claps.
And it's thrilling!
It's thrilling to believe that this is a one-of-kind, unparalleled performance.

We all love being the best and we all want to have the best.
Give me the latest toy, the most expensive gadget.
I don't want ordinary, and I certainly don't want to be normal;
uninteresting.

But Jesus criticises such an attitude.
He told His friends to be "servants."
To 'be [the last] of all'; the *least* of all: [Mk. 9:35].
And that's a *great*, difficult challenge.
One for which we'll need the Holy Spirit's help.

Let's pray: Father God, ..., in Jesus' name, amen.

[Ask children to leave.]

Look again at our Old Testament reading - at *Proverbs*.
What do you see?
What do you make of this description of '[a] capable wife'?
What I'd like you to notice is what it *implies* about holiness.

We imagine - with reason, surely - that holiness is being a bit like, well, "Mother" Theresa.
That she is, in a way - and to many people - the *definitive* model of what it is to be a follower - an *imitator* - of Christ.
And the comparison between us and her can cause us to despair.
As a married man with a mortgage in McMinnville, what chance have I of becoming a nun in the slums of Calcutta?
What freedom have I to "throw in the towel" and be a full-time nurse to the leprous, homeless children of India?
I've too many responsibilities, too many dependants counting on me and on my provision.
Is that how you feel?

And are you intimidated - are you *shamed* - by those we see captured in our stained-glass windows (at the back, there), bachelors, all of them:
Chaste, unemployed, itinerant martyrs.
They faced down lions and murderous mobs.
Squads of lethal Roman legionaries and violent storms at sea.
When Jesus said "Follow me," they did so immediately.
They dropped their nets and were off!
They didn't have to call their internet-provider first to ask for a temporary suspension of service.
Or call the gas-man to shut off the supply.

They had no children to find baby-sitters for; or, seemingly, elderly parents that needed their care.

But when we conjure up in our minds an idea of what it looks like to be a *spiritual* person, a *godly* person, we likely don't see ourselves but rather them.

Rebekah was telling me yesterday, coincidentally, about Agatha of Sicily: a very early Roman convert, she enthusiastically took a vow to remain a virgin much to the annoyance of her smitten suitor, the island's governor. And, in a fit of resentful jealousy, he had her breasts cut off.[\[n.1\]](#) But she wouldn't relent.

I find my self thinking about men like William Tyndale.

His death is commemorated on October 6th, but very likely this is a mistake, and it actually took place sometime in the last few weeks of September - around now, in other words.[\[n.2\]](#)

He was one of the first Reformers - one of the first to, publicly, from the Scriptures, challenge, by forceful argument, the Catholic Church on some of its teaching - to attack its immense authority.

But the principal thing that he did to "upset the (Medieval) apple-cart" was to attempt a translation of the Bible into English for wide dissemination, and in this he was *extraordinarily* successful:

Indeed, as much as nine-tenths of what you read today in the New Testament is attributable to Tyndale.[\[n.3\]](#)

And this was an astonishingly subversive act, for the (Pope's) clergy kept the "Good Book" in Latin so as to control its interpretation; to safeguard their own position as intermediaries; to make themselves indispensable - and so, influential - to the communities they "served."

And Tyndale's translation project threatened all that, despite the awesome significance it had for common people in the British Isles.

King Henry VIII wasn't so much perturbed by this[\[n.4\]](#) - he even owned a copy,[\[n.5\]](#) but he was indignant that Tyndale had criticised his annulment and separation from the queen, Katherine of Aragon *in print*; and, at the behest of his bishops, issued an arrest warrant.

Branded a heretic, Tyndale, a vicar as well as an accomplished linguist, fled to the continent, to the Low Countries - to what is now Belgium - and, heroically, continued his work nonetheless, in secret, in poverty, unmarried, for about a dozen years.

Almost now an Anne Frank type character, living in an attic in another's house; 'his life [was] in constant jeopardy. Repeatedly, government and church-appointed agents were dispatched from [London] to scour the European landscape in search of th[is] fugitive.'[\[n.6\]](#)

When he was caught, it was due to a traitorous "friend" of his, who had gambling debts to pay.[n.7]

This man led soldiers to the house and they arrested Tyndale on behalf of the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles.

They imprisoned him, half-starved him, and humiliated him in public:

Before a large, jeering crowd, he was dressed in his priestly vestments - like these [gesture to self] - and then stripped of them to his underwear.

Then, in mockery, they brought him Eucharistic elements to consecrate, only to whisk them away again at the last minute.

He was then asked to recant, but he cried out instead, in defiance, "'Lord, open the king of England's eyes'" At which point the executioner leapt on him to silence him, and strangled Tyndale to death.

(They then burned the body.)[n.8]

So, how can we live up to such an example?

Deliberately, as I recounted the tale, I used words like "extraordinary," "astonishing," "awesome."

And not just to "lay it on thick," but because, *objectively*, I think they were - are - appropriate, right:

William Tyndale was an exemplary disciple.

But *my* discipleship is *none* of these things.

Against this *witness*, my own is paltry, shambolic.

And I expect you feel that way too, if only sometimes.

But holiness might be more humdrum than you think.

And this is where I urge you to think on what we heard from Solomon this morning; on what he had to say about that 'capable wife' - about how she worked hard with her 'hands' with commonplace materials like 'wool': that's verse thirteen.

About how she has a garden where she grows 'fruit'.[v.16]

About how she is tender and dutiful toward her family, and ensures they are always warm by being properly "clothed" - the word is used *three* times in the paragraph: v.21, 22, 25.

And observe too that these clothes are described as being 'crimson' and, later, 'purple'.[v.21,22] These were *expensive* dyes in the Late Bronze Age.

Rare colours.

(Derived from the shells of *teeny, tiny* sea snails, thousands and thousands of them, that had to be dived for to be collected from the ocean-floor and then crushed.)

She has, in other words, *indulged* her dependents.

She has done much more than just the basic minimum for them.

Notice too how she makes those around her 'happy'.[v.28]

Finally, we hear, she also 'opens her [home] to the poor'.[v.20]

This woman, in other words, doesn't work for Red Cross.

She's not in the Peace Corps.

She's not the C. E. O. of Oxfam, and she's not going to end up emblazoned in a church window.

But, seemingly, given all the space that is being devoted to her in these pages, the LORD - [hold Bible aloft] whose book this is, remember - thinks she's pretty marvellous (not mediocre).

Why?!

And keep in mind too, that the Bible, as much as it appears to "revolve" around prophets and Messiahs and necromancers, is *stuffed* with people just like her: in the *Psalms*, they're called 'those who live quietly in the land'. [35:20, N. I. V.]

And we overlook them, don't we?

All the time.

Because their stories don't captivate us; *and yet we shouldn't*.

Their presence is *very* important; *critical* even.

And the Savior was one of them.

He spent most of His life in obscurity as a carpenter in a small, provincial town enjoying what was, more-or-less, a 'hand-to-mouth existence'. [n.9]

'He was', to be frank - His miracles notwithstanding - 'a *simple* rural figure. He talked about the sparrows and the lilies to fishermen and peasants'. [n.10]

Was this just incidental?

Or is it a crucial element in what He is modelling for us and the rest of humanity? [n.11]

And it is likely this is what He meant when He said we need to be "salt of the earth." [See: Mt. 5:13]

Not cinnamon.

Nor chilli powder:

Dramatic and powerful and interesting on your palate.

No.

Salt.

We are, in other words, most of us, being enjoined to be subtly, discreetly transformative by everyday, modest, conservative, humble choices.

This won't be easy.

And it won't be exciting, either.

But from the world's point of view, which desperately needs more *quiet*, kind, family-orientated, community-orientated, *unfashionable* people, this is a '*scandalous*' message. [n.12]

Let's take a moment to reflect.

Footnotes:

1. See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agatha_of_Sicily
2. See: <http://www.tyndale.org/tsj25/arblaster.html>
3. Daniell, David (1994), *William Tyndale: A Biography*, New Haven, M. A.: Yale University Press, 1.
4. Bobrick, Benson (2001), *Wide As the Waters: The Story of the English Bible and the Revolution*, New York, N. Y.: Simon & Schuster, 271.
5. See: Bullen, George (1857), *Catalogue of the Library of the British and Foreign Bible Society*, London: Reed & Pardon, 113.
6. Lawson, Steven J. (2015), *The Daring Mission of William Tyndale*, Sanford, F. L.: Reformation Trust Publishing (Ligonier Ministries), 123.
7. Daniell (1994), 361-363.
8. *Ibid.*, 374-383.
9. France, R. T. (1979), 'God and Mammon', *The Evangelical Quarterly*, Volume 51, No. 1, pp. 3-21, 7.
10. Yoder, John Howard (1994), *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, Carlisle: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. & The Paternoster Press, 6. (My emphasis.)
11. See: Yoder, John Howard (1997), 'Are You the One Who Is to Come?', in *For the Nations: Essays Evangelical and Public*, Grand Rapids, M. I.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, pp. 199-218, 201.
12. Yoder, John Howard (1994), *The Royal Priesthood*, Grand Rapids, M. I.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 62.