

PROVERBS FOR THE HAVES

Pentecost 16 Year B

Prov 2:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; Ps 125, Jas 2:1-10, (11-13), 14-17; Mk. 7:24-37 Gladstone 09/09/2018

According to an oft-told story, it is said that at a London restaurant, Winston Churchill once sent a pudding back to the kitchen because “it lacked a theme.” Well, I don’t know about you but I’m probably only too happy to eat a pudding without a theme.

However, be that as it may, when one considers preaching from any snippet from The Book of Proverbs you can get something of the same feeling. Yes, the overarching theme of the book is Wisdom. Beyond that, though, it’s a little hard to string together any sizeable stretch of verses in this book and be able to come up with a common theme for that segment of Proverbs. Instead the various proverbs that make up this book tend to have a little of this and a little of that with a dash of something else thrown in every few verses so that it’s all but impossible to find a consistent thread on which to base a unified sermon. But hey—let’s not let that stop us from trying.

Before we get into the meat and potatoes of the proverbs we’re looking at this morning, however, lets have a look at some background.

Tradition assigns authorship of three biblical books to Solomon. The rabbis said that he wrote the Song of Solomon as an amorous youth, Proverbs as a middle-aged man, and Ecclesiastes as a (disillusioned) old man. While the superscription to the book of Proverbs in chapter one, verse one, reflects that tradition, the book contains several collections of sayings. Some could very well go back to the time of Solomon, but it’s impossible to be certain about authorship or dates of composition.

Nevertheless, the book of Proverbs is the preeminent book of “Wisdom” in the Old Testament, and so is understandably associated with Solomon— the epitome of wisdom (see 1 Kings 4:29-34). The book is part of the Wisdom literature of the Bible, along with Job, Ecclesiastes, and (in the Apocrypha) Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon.

Wisdom literature seeks to teach its readers/hearers “wisdom”—that is, how to live well—like many of the self-improvement book you can find these days. This wisdom is handed down from parents to children (1:8) and is based not on revelation but on experience and observation. Nevertheless, we need to realise that it’s grounded in a right relationship with God. We are told no less than three times in the Book of Proverbs that, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (1:7; 9:10; 15:33).

The task of Wisdom literature, including Proverbs, is character formation. It seeks to train up young people in the way they should go (22:6). It upholds the virtues of honesty,

hard work, self-control, and respect for those in authority, among other things. And it addresses issues of everyday life: economics, friends, family, work, sex, politics, etc. In the words of the Biblical commentator, Ellen Davis, “The proverbs are spiritual guides for ordinary people, on an ordinary day, when water does not pour forth from rocks and angels do not come to lunch.” Since that description pretty much sums up most of you gathered here in worship on this fine Sunday morning, it’s appropriate to pay some attention to these “spiritual guides” in one’s preaching.

The proverbs that have been set apart in the lectionary for this Sunday’s reading are a sample of the hundreds of such sayings in the book of Proverbs. These six verses do not, in general, build upon one another, though they may be grouped according to common words or common themes, which is what we are going to try to do this morning.

This part of the lectionary readings from the book of Proverbs, appears to link up three sets of two verses that appear to address issues related to generosity, money, riches, and poverty.

What’s striking about many of the proverbs that have anything at all to do with these themes is how at variance they are with so many of the proverbs that are popular today. A lot of biblical proverbs—as well as the laws of Israel and the later tirades of the prophets against Israel for not following those laws more diligently—presume that there will always be poor people and that they are to be accorded special rights—you have to deal with them in certain ways, mostly in ways that trend toward all things generous (and most certainly very far away from all things exploitative or punitive or cruel).

The proverbs current in Israel and enshrined in the Bible mostly take that tack. As just mentioned, however, modern proverbs in particular don’t typically advocate on behalf of the poor or push people towards acting overly generously towards the poor. Maybe that’s because the proverbs we most prize these days all tend to run in another direction in terms of how well-motivated individuals can be the in charge of their own destiny so as to ensure a rich future (and not an impoverished one).

“When the going gets tough, the tough get going.”

“The early bird catches the worm.”

“A penny saved is a penny earned.”

“God helps those who help themselves.”

Our modern proverbs tell us that when people succeed, it’s their own doing. By proxy, then, we believe that those who do *not* succeed have mostly only themselves to blame. Therefore, while we might not be inclined to actively exploit these people,

neither do we always feel any particular obligation to go too far out of our way to give them extra help. In a land of opportunity, those who fail, do so because they didn't have the sense to open the door when opportunity knocked (and another popular proverb tells us this may happen just once as it is) or they lack the initiative to go out and make their own luck or create their own opportunities.

The Book of Proverbs is, of course, large and sprawling enough that tucked into various corners of this book is a lot of good advice on not being lazy. So it's not as though there's no connection—even in this book—between a person's actions (or lack thereof) and the consequences that may accrue to that person as a result. Among its many charms, the Book of Proverbs does tend to encompass a great deal of life!

Let us then consider the proverbs we have before us today. Generally, the specific proverbs that appear in this reading have in common the theme of wealth and poverty and, specifically, how the wealthy are to regard and treat the poor.

The sense of these verses is generally straightforward. **Verse one** reminds us that one ought to choose a good reputation before wealth. A good name, a good reputation, is something earned over many years. It implies integrity, honesty, and responsibility. It cannot be bought. Indeed, it is worth more than all the riches in the world.

Part of that good name and regard stems from a humble recognition that both the rich and the poor are created by God. **(v 2)** When they come together, whether in worship or on the street, the wealthy person has no more claim to divine favour than does his less fortunate neighbour. God is the God of rich and poor alike, and both must look to God either in gratitude for what they have or for help in getting what they lack (but desperately need to live). This proverb is meant to level the playing field, to help rich and poor alike to see each other at eye level and in compassion.

This observation was probably counterintuitive for those of Solomon's day. They, like us, have long embraced the notion that personal wealth and privilege are the consequence of divine blessing.

Elsewhere in Proverbs, we are told that wealth is more desirable than poverty and that the poor frequently suffer the consequences of their own folly, especially laziness or drunkenness. At the end of the day, however, the wealthy for whom this book likely was composed, find here a reminder that their prosperity earns them no special status before God.

In **verses 8-9**, we're reminded that those to whom money is owed should remember that this relationship ought not to be one of abuse. Falling back on an agricultural theme, if you sow injustice or iniquity, you will (eventually) receive a harvest of trouble.

In contrast, those who are generous will find blessing "for they share their bread with the poor." We're not told the nature of that blessing, although the verse is likely often misunderstood as a crude, divine investment plan whereby the giver will gain materially from acts of charity. And we certainly see that on some of those early morning religious programs. It's called "prosperity doctrine" and should be avoided at all cost.

It's more likely, however, that the proverb points to a divine blessing that stems from God's approval. The assumption is that the wealthy person's abundance is a consequence of the God's prior blessing—a blessing given precisely so that the rich might serve as a conduit of blessing to others—to share (note: not just give but to share) not only their money but even the food from their table.

Verses 22-23 outline the wealthy person's mistreatment of the poor. The specific words used in these verses imply a court setting. The gate was the centre of legal and business activity in a town. In this case, God is both prosecuting attorney and judge. In words that echo the prophetic tradition, these verses charge the wealthy to act justly and, especially not to manipulate the legal system to crush the poor. To do so sets the rich in opposition to God who will act as an attorney for the poor. God himself will extract justice from them if they do.

These proverbs tie nicely to the verses appointed for this day from James, chapter 2. Both lectionary readings draw us away from some kind of sloganized understanding of Justification by grace through faith. We are indeed justified by faith but faith is never alone. As James says,

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? (James 2:14-16)

Like James, these proverbs call us to do more than just believe in God—they call us to act and live justly, especially with regard to the needy among us.

To God our provider, be all glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.