

33rd Sunday in O.T. 2020

The first reading of today's Mass begins, "*A perfect wife – who can find her? She is far beyond the price of pearls*". These words might well be para-phrased as: "Perfect Christians – where can we find them? They are a real treasure." This surely is an important question for all of us. But first, what are we to make of that reading taken from The Book of Proverbs? It did indeed open with the words, "*A perfect wife - who can find her?*", and continued, "*Her husband's heart has confidence in her, and from her he will derive no little profit.*" The reading concluded with the declaration, "The Word of God", and we all responded, "Thanks be to God"! But must we not ask ourselves, "Has this particular "Word of God" any relevance for us today?"

Given the sensitivity today surrounding the issue of "gender equality", it would be all too easy to dismiss the reading as simply representative of the crass, patriarchal thinking of a bygone age. However, to do so is to miss the whole point of the reading. It must be remembered that this reading was written at least two and a half thousand years ago. The author did indeed live in a very patriarchal society, but nevertheless, against all the odds, he makes a radical decision – he chooses a "housewife" as his ideal person. He does so not because of her commitment to household chores, but because she is a person of foresight, ability, and charity. She is presented as a model for everyone, both women and men, whatever their role in society may be.

If we look closely at the qualities of this so called "perfect wife" there is much we can learn from her. The reading says, "*Advantage and not hurt she brings him all the days of her life.*" Isn't this the golden rule, "*Always treat others as you would like them to treat you*" (Mt.7:12). It applies to a husband as well as to a wife. Indeed, it applies to everyone - a son, a daughter, a friend, a neighbour, a client, a student, a patient, a customer. Advantage, not hurt, we are to bring to one another all the days of our lives. Isn't this central to living our Christian faith?

The "perfect wife" is, "*always busy with wool and flax, she does her work with eager hands.*" This is not about relegating women to the kitchen! It is about faithful dedication to one's chosen way of life

whatever it may be. This wife is a model for us all; our talents, great or small, are to be used with enthusiasm for the benefit of others.

The “perfect wife” *“holds out her hand to the poor, she opens her arms to the needy.”* In our very individualistic society, a common philosophy of life is, “What's mine is my own!” This is not the attitude of the perfect wife. She reminds us all that the fruits of our labour are not for our own selfish benefit - we have a responsibility towards others.

The reading then goes on to say, *“Charm is deceitful, and beauty empty.”* The woman in this reading is not ruled by concerns about external, superficial beauty; hers is an inner beauty; wisdom is her beauty. May we be as wise as this woman and not be deceived by image, nor seek to deceive others by pretending to be what we are not. A wise heart is an honest heart.

In this word portrait of the “perfect wife”, she displays fidelity and dedication, and we are called to do the same in whatever role we have in life. The parable that Jesus tells in the Gospel underscores this, for we are to note that the talents, entrusted to the servants, did not belong to them, but belonged to the Master. The servants were entrusted to use the talents wisely. Our natural talents, skills, and abilities are God-given gifts, and with gratitude, we are to use them for the good of others and in the service of others.

In the Gospel parable the worth of each servant was not assessed on the sum that they received, but on the care with which they fulfilled their trust. The servant who hid his one talent, giving it back to the Master on his return, is like those Christians who receive the gift of faith but do not do much with it. They live their faith in a spirit of minimalism, ticking the box of practice, but failing to be inspired by love or gratitude.

As we ponder on the question, “Perfect Christians – where can we find them?”, we would do well to allow these words of the Lord to echo in our hearts, *“Well done good and faithful servant; you have shown that you can be faithful in small things, I will trust you with greater, come and join in your master's happiness.”* **Amen**