

Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Book of Proverbs is a distillation of sayings and teachings which had grown up over hundreds of years, most probably from Rabbis and Scribes. Its world is a vastly different one to ours. This is clearly seen in the tasks of the “capable wife.” She is praised for her work with wool, flax, in the vineyard, and in real estate. It’s only in the context of an agrarian society that the power of this text makes sense.

Until quite recently, women in Palestinian society, and in wider society for that matter, were considered the “possessions” of their husbands. They could be bought, sold, divorced, or killed without any appeal to the law. Wives in this society had no legally recognized human rights. They were expected to serve and shut-up.

By contrast, then, this text from the Book of Proverbs, which can seem so old-fashioned to us, was a liberating text in its day. A woman’s right to work is not only defended, but also extolled. She is praised for her creativity, wisdom, goodness, strength, sense of justice, generosity, joy, and faith. In any age and for either gender this is not a bad list of virtues toward which we should all aspire.

And these days of course, through the ongoing revelation of the Spirit, we believe that what the Book of Proverbs expects and praises in a capable wife, we should equally look for in a capable husband.

It is almost possible that Jesus had women in mind when he shared the parable of the talents in today’s Gospel. What can often get lost in the debates about who should be ordained in today’s Church, is that women have always and still “lead” the Church in powerful and long-lasting ways. From the extraordinary abilities of religious and lay women in Catholic welfare, education, healthcare, overseas missions, and theological reflections, to wives and mothers whose daily witness to the fidelity and goodness of God, this all reveals in innumerable ways the power of the parable of the talents. The reality is that if it were not for women’s leadership, commitment and faith, it would be hard to see how the Church could survive. We would not be able to continue almost all of our ministries.

None of this minimizes the pain and hurt some women have experienced at the hands of the Church. Some feel as though their particular contribution to the life of the Church has not been fully realized.

All we can hope and pray for is that we may find ways to use everyone’s talents for the building up of the Kingdom of God, and that we may see that everyone’s contribution, irrespective of gender, is precious, and worthy of praise.

Fr. Eric T. Carpine, ofm