

Proverbs 22:1 - 2, 8 - 9, 22 - 23  
Psalm 125  
James 2:1 - 10, 14 - 17  
Mark 7:24 - 37

---

**A good name is to be chosen rather than wealth: on letting your life speak.**

---

There is a Quaker meeting house in Tasmania where a glass wall is being etched with the words: *Let your life speak*. To let your life speak means gaining a reputation for something, but what would we want our life to say? Most of the time we don't know what our life says, but other people do. But we still have a choice about what we aim for. Proverbs says: *A good name is to be chosen rather than wealth*. In context the person who is genuinely rich is the one who has a reputation for integrity and justice. These verses of Proverbs may be addressed to those in authority because the Lord takes a special interest in the needs of the poor, whose circumstances often reflect on the integrity of those with power and resources. It is not that there is anything bad about being rich, and a rich person is not saved by becoming poor. What is bad is to have resources and to neglect the needs of the poor, or even to exploit them for further gain.

The counsel of Proverbs is wise words for those who care about the state of the world. Many of us grew up in a society that responded to the collapse of the great Depression by establishing a safety net for the community. Our mantra was: the integrity of a society is judged by how it treats its most vulnerable members. This outlook still holds good for us, and is in keeping with Proverbs. It is good to remember this because it is common for humans to favour the wealthy and powerful over the poor. This is the eve of the anniversary of September 11. As Jack Thomas contemplates the order restricting him from meeting Osama Bin Laden, and as George Bush announces an intensification of the search for him, it is salutary to recall that while all aircraft were grounded after the attack on the Twin Towers, members of the fabulously wealthy Bin Laden family were permitted to fly out of the USA.

The wisdom of Proverbs is reflected in James, which shows that it is impossible to have faith in Jesus Christ and favour the rich and powerful to the neglect of the poor. That is because the pattern of Jesus' life, which is our model, is one of being rich and yet becoming poor for the sake of others. His self-giving is incompatible with a life of exploitation and self-interest. James also says favouritism towards the rich makes no sense on practical grounds because as a rule they act to protect themselves; they oppress, exploit and litigate. Christians must ask themselves, who is our true benefactor? Who is worthy of our devotion and honour? If, as James says, God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith, that might mean we should show them deference, and in that process find our faith enriched.

As favouritism is incompatible with faith so is indifference, because belief is more than intellectual assent. It involves concrete actions that follow as a demonstration of faith. James uses Abraham as an example, and also Rahab. The beliefs of both had a direct outcome in what they did next. Faith is active trust. Faith reaches out to the neighbour,

as God has reached out to us. The opposite of that is indifference: apathy, which is no corollary for faith at all.

Everything Proverbs counsels and James seeks is demonstrated in Mark where Jesus gains a reputation for his actions which results in two marginalised, nameless people being healed, liberated and given a voice. Jesus embodies God's desire for the healing of creation, the bridging of divisions, and the cure of dis-ease.

The Syrophoenician woman was ethnically and culturally a Gentile. By certain rules she had no right to appeal to Jesus, but she came seeking help because her daughter was in the grip of something evil. Jesus' initial refusal is stated in exclusive and insulting terms. The children of Israel have first call on his gifts, not the dogs. Depriving the family of good food to feed the outsiders would be like casting pearls before swine. What Jesus does at first goes against everything we cherish about him, and there is little gain in trying to see the story differently. The woman is not hardened or impervious. She is receptive and vulnerable, and she is persistent. In response Jesus shifts ground and the woman's needs and views prevail. In his acceptance of her request, and her argument, the inclusive and liberating nature of grace is demonstrated. Commentators have speculated why this story was kept. Its perpetuation has given the unnamed Syrophoenician woman an ongoing voice in the church, despite the dominance of the male perspective in the interpretation of our faith tradition. The woman is a representative of those who have been kept out, marginalised and forced to be silent. She is a sign to us that God honours those who appear to have no rights, and who persist in their prayer. She stands as a sign that Jesus' original circle really was an inclusive fellowship in which women and men, Gentile and Jew, rich and poor, were welcomed and had a part to play.

Because he was unable to ask for himself, the friend of the deaf man with a speech impediment brought him to Jesus. This is the story on which a liturgical action used in Baptism is based. The minister touches the ears and the lips of the person and says: *may the Lord open your ears to hear his word and your mouth to proclaim his praise.* In this we pray God will touch us in our deepest impediment and our darkest silence. The root of the word obey is connected to the word to hear. There is no speaking without hearing, and once the two faculties were restored in the man there was no stopping him from speaking. Ironically Jesus had the power to set free but he could not stop the wave of marvellous praise that followed. The news of what Jesus had done continued to go out into the world, and he earned a reputation for the way he treated these two poor souls. His life spoke of how God favours the poor and marginalised, and reaches beyond the boundaries of normal life for their sake.

The congregation that listens to the Word is called to "let its life speak". What would it look like if a church did choose to live for the poor, in the power of God's reign? Professor John de Gruchy, a South African theologian and opponent of the Apartheid regime will visit Melbourne shortly. He tells of the life of the congregation where he and his wife have worshiped for 30 years. The church was traditionally suburban, white middle class and politically liberal. Until the 1970s it was the spiritual home of professional people, university students and established families. Increasingly during the 1970s and 80s, it began to identify with the struggle against apartheid. The church developed a reputation for being a "communist church" because it provided a home for conscientious objectors and allowed a liberation movement to meet in its rooms. On

two occasions the church was surrounded by armed soldiers and police enforcing a law that no public meetings were to be held there. The Minister walked past the soldiers and ripped the proclamation from the door of the church.

In the post-apartheid period the congregation continues to give its support to people who are shunned or ostracised by society or other churches. Street children are trained to play marimbas and are included in the Sunday worship. Domestic workers from nearby homes have been welcomed into membership, French and Swahili speaking refugees from violence in Burundi, Rwanda and the Congo have found a home, and gay people are made welcome. Members now engage in ministry at a prison, which is home to many of the gangs that plague the townships. The present minister has developed a special ministry to those who are so often forced to the edges of society. Equally remarkable is the extent to which the older, white members have remained part of the life of the church, sometimes unsettled by the experience, but invariably enriched.

What sort of reputation do we seek for ourselves at Mark the Evangelist? The only one that has value is a life that speaks of him who was rich, and became poor that others might know the riches of God's love and justice. The local congregation, where these stories are told and celebrated is the place where people are formed for Christian faith and witness. The power of these stories enables an unusual reconciliation to take place, and lives begin to speak of unexpected things. May it be so for us, to the praise and glory of God.