Homily 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (A) '26

'Don't get the wrong end of the stick'

I walked into a classroom, in my early teaching career, to see a student with their head down on the desk and their eyes closed. I, immediately, assumed that the student was being lazy, uninterested or disrespectful, sleeping during the lesson. However, later that day, I discovered that the student had been up all night caring for a younger sibling because their parent was unwell. The student was exhausted and struggling to stay awake. Situations can have very different meanings depending on the circumstances surrounding them - context. This illustrates why it is important not to jump to conclusions based solely on what we read, see or hear. Context and the 'bigger picture' provide the background and information needed to interpret situations accurately, otherwise we risk misunderstanding writings, actions, words or intentions.

The First Reading from Proverbs 31 is a passage with considerable contemporary relevance, but it is often misunderstood and used to justify the patriarchal notion, 'a woman's place is in the home.' It is, therefore, important to understand its original context and consider the entirety of the passage, vv.10-31, rather than selected verses often used as a checklist of expectations of women. Proverbs 31:10–31 is the concluding section of the book of Proverbs, a Wisdom Book. It concludes describing a woman whose life demonstrates precisely that wisdom: "A woman who fears the LORD is to be praised" (Proverbs 31:30). A woman who fears, or better loves, The Lord is one who follows The Torah and lives a wise life worthy of God's Covenant relationship. The passage is therefore not primarily about domestic competence, marriage or female respectability. It is about wisdom embodied in everyday life. The poem is an idealised portrait of wisdom, using poetic imagery, to celebrate the many dimensions of a life characterised by wise love of God and neighbour. The poem's intention is to inspire rather than oppress. If we look at the whole passage (below), instead of the carefully selected verses in The Lectionary, the woman in the poem is not confined to the domestic sphere. She engages in commerce, agriculture, investment and charitable activity. She is economically active, intellectually capable and socially responsible. This challenges interpretations that reduce biblical womanhood to domestic service alone.

Similarly in today's Gospel, we must know the purpose of parables in Israel at the time of Jesus to understand their meaning. Parables are stories, taken from everyday life with ONE KEY MESSAGE, the details of the story emphasise that key message. The key message of Matthew 25:14–30, known as the *Parable of the Talents*, is that God expects us to use faithfully the gifts, abilities, opportunities and resources He has entrusted to us. The central message of the parable, therefore, is not about being cast out into the darkness or being punished by God but that God does not expect everyone to achieve the same things, but what He does expect is that each one of us bears fruit with what has been given.

To correctly interpret passages from Holy Scripture in the light of contemporary family and social life we, therefore, must be careful to consider the enduring biblical principles, the literary genres used and the social and economic circumstances in which the passage was written…we need context.

Knowing the 'full picture' and context of the home life of the sleepy student was, for me, a life-lesson well learned.

How stunningly enlightening is that.

A Woman of Noble Character Proverbs 31:10-31 in Full

A woman of noble character who can find?
She is worth far more than rubies.
Her husband has full confidence in her
and lacks nothing of value.
She brings him good, not harm,
all the days of her life.

She selects wool and flax
and works with eager hands.
She is like the merchant ships,
bringing her food from afar.
She gets up while it is still night;
she provides food for her family
and portions for her female servants.
She considers a field and buys it;
out of her earnings she plants a vineyard.
She sets about her work vigorously;
her arms are strong for her tasks.
She sees that her trading is profitable,
and her lamp does not go out at night.
In her hand she holds the distaff
and grasps the spindle with her fingers.
She opens her arms to the poor
and extends her hands to the needy.
When it snows, she has no fear for her household;
for all of them are clothed in scarlet.
She makes coverings for her bed;
she is clothed in fine linen and purple.
Her husband is respected at the city gate,
where he takes his seat among the elders of the land.
She makes linen garments and sells them,
and supplies the merchants with sashes.
She is clothed with strength and dignity;
she can laugh at the days to come.
She speaks with wisdom,
and faithful instruction is on her tongue.
She watches over the affairs of her household
and does not eat the bread of idleness.
Her children arise and call her blessed;
her husband also, and he praises her:
“**Many women do noble things,**
but you surpass them all.”
Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting;
but a woman who loves the Lord is to be praised.
Honour her for all that her hands have done,
and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.