

## SERMON FOR 22 SEPTEMBER 2024

## ST JUDE'S BRIGHTON

Ah! Wisdom! Do you ever think about wisdom, about being wise? Here are some sayings purporting to be wise. *“Your mind is like a parachute; it functions only when open.”*  
*“Lead your life so you wouldn't be afraid to sell your parrot to a gossip.”*

It's probably not a bad thing for a parish to consider the content of the Book of Proverbs as it approaches the appointment of a parish priest. The priest will want to get a sense of the direction and mission the parish has come from and wants to wisely embark upon.

This morning's reading from part of the wisdom literature of the bible, requires careful consideration. To preach on this reading from the Book of Proverbs requires wise consideration, and in front of today's women requires an absolute attention to detail.

Let's start by recognising that Israel understood wisdom to be the practical knowledge of life and the world as it is experienced. Proverbs is a collection of sayings by a succession of wise men (not much we can do about that) who had charge of the moral and practical training of young men of the court and upper classes, trained to take on responsibilities in society, politics and diplomacy. (The Proverbs: Robert Dentan). 'Wisdom means the primary skill in the management of one's life.' (The Proverbs: Robert Dentan).

But why is wisdom personified in the feminine? Is it really about women, or the woman in today's text? Not at all. In Hebrew the word wisdom is a grammatical feminine noun. That's why!

Our reading from Proverbs begins with a question. *“A capable wife who can find?”* What follows is the answer. Yes the capable wife - wisdom - can be found but she, wisdom, is as rare but more precious than precious jewels. Yes she can be found, and the vehicle to see the evidence for wisdom is in the proverbial woman who is diligent in the management of her family household. Her expertise is in terms that maybe classed as dated and archaic. She works hard, she recognises the worth of her produce, she is an excellent seamstress, she speaks with wisdom, her children and husband praise her, etc. the sense of the text is not lost on us. This is how Proverbs characterises wisdom.

Is Proverbs revealing the differences between men and women? And although our reading tells us *“Her husband is known in the city gates, taking his seat among the elders of the land.”* It is his wife who speaks with wisdom *“She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue,”*

You see, it's not about women, or comparing women with men. It's not about sexism or gender equality or disparity. It's about those wise actions and speech, born from the experience of life - and capable of strengthening society through the activity of men and women acting wisely.

Many of the poetic phrases depicting human and godly behaviour stem from real world observation. It's obvious that men too may have wisdom and wise instruction. So, parishes need to have men and women who are prepared to examine parish history and plan for the future accordingly. Making decisions for immediate and long term application. If we are to regard our reading from Proverbs as a gift from God - to instruct us in what makes for wisdom - then we should take notice.

Let's take a breather from Proverbs and turn to our other readings.

We could jump to the conclusion that each is about behaviour. The Psalm encourages us not to mix with the ungodly. James tells us to be careful about our choice of occupation. The gospel tells us not to seek preferment.

Each in turn warns against the influence of ungodly people, ungodly speech. The tongue is a firebrand says James. He must have seen the destructive result of unbridled speech and the back stabbing comment. And we mustn't miss the point the gospel makes about what makes for greatness.

To paraphrase the last sentence from our Proverbs reading, *“Give wisdom a share in the fruit of her hands, and let wisdoms works be seen in the gates of the city.”*

Fr John