

Proverbs 31: 10 - 31

Psalm 1

James 32:13 - 4:3, 7 - 8a

Mark 9: 30 - 37

Notes on the Gospel Lesson

This week's text depicts what must have been one of the heartbreaks of Jesus' ministry. The dispute among the disciples as to which of them was the greatest demonstrated fully the conclusion of the previous paragraph: "They did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him." (Mark 9:32) Even Jesus' powerful words failed to overcome their ambition. The disciples continued to argue about their status to the end of Jesus' earthly ministry. How it must have grieved him that even at the Last Supper itself, this dispute raged on. (Luke 22: 24 - 27)

We normally take Jesus' next words to imply that children were of very little value in Jesus' day. He tells the disciples, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." (Mark 9: 35b - 37) There is strong evidence, however, that shows that our implication may not be correct.

Infant mortality was terribly high in first century Palestine. Anthropological research tells us the average lifespan for a man was 28 years and for a woman was only 18 years. These numbers are affected by the high rates of infant and child mortality. If a man lived to age 12, he had a very good chance of surviving until his fifties. (The mortality rate for women is higher due to the frequency of death in childbirth.) In any case, these figures give us some idea of how often the heartrending loss of a child had to be endured.

Remember Jairus, the Roman centurion, the woman of Nain, among others. If children were of such little value, then these people would not have made such desperate pleas to Jesus for help. Each child was precious. This indicates that we need to look more deeply into Jesus' meaning. As is so often true in biblical study, while we may not have the answer, there is great value in exploring the questions.

Notes on the Old Testament Lesson

In this familiar "Ode to a Capable Wife", it is noteworthy that this is a very wealthy woman. In addition to the number of servants that she has, note that "her clothing is fine linen and purple". Only the extremely rich could afford purple garments. The only source of purple dye throughout the biblical period was a tiny snail that could be found in the Mediterranean Sea. This murex snail was crushed to extract a purple liquid that could be used to dye cloth. However, only a small drop of the liquid could be extracted from one snail so thousands of murex snails had to be crushed in order to dye even a small amount of cloth. This made the dye terribly expensive. By the statement, "her clothing is fine linen and purple", alone we can see that this woman is extremely wealthy.

Yet this wealthy woman does not choose a life of leisure. In spite of all her servants, she is up before dawn to provide food for her household. She makes her own clothes. She uses her wealth to help the needy.

She also takes on many roles normally reserved for the husband. She considers a field and not only buys it but plants a vineyard. She even determines the price of merchandise to be sold. Yet she does not assume these roles because of her husband's laziness or incapacity. The husband is serving "in the gates" and is well-known among "the elders of Israel". This means that he is an important member of the judicial system because it was in the gates that the elders heard disputes and judged civil law. (See Ruth 4: 1 - 12) Because of his wife's wisdom and work ethic, the husband trusts her (Prov. 31: 11) to see to his business affairs while he serves the community.