

Mothering Sunday 2024 – Richard Ford

Proverbs 31:10-31

Some years ago, there was a television advert that began “What is a mother?” The answer that the advert gave to that question was, as I recall, that a mother was a person who ensured that her children’s shirts and blouses always looked whiter than white because she used Persil!

The English actress and writer, Nanette Newman, asked the same questions to a class of 6 to 8 year-old primary school children. What they came up with was interesting, but not exactly flattering.

6-year old Stephen commented that “When I am school my mummy haz fun.”

7- year old Penny was rather more realistic, although a bit unfair on her dad: “Women do the washing up and tidying and men go on the train and get tired.”

A number of children thought that their mothers were, at times, unreasonable, so Colin wrote; “My mother ses she’s cold and then she makes me put on a coat!”

And for some their mothers were rather limited, as Felicity demonstrated, writing: “When you are a baby your mother feeds you from her bozom but she can only do milk!”

Ben also had a rather low opinion of his mother: “Mothers and other nasty people frighten children to make them be good.”

And Cormac was clearly drawing on some recent experience when he wrote: “You should never help a baby to walk because it falls down and cuts its knee and you always get a smack.”

Some of the children had some advice to give their mothers, as did 7 year-old Norman: “Babies need to be loved by their mother in case everybody hates them when they grow up.”

7 year-old Noura suggested an ulterior motive for loving your baby: “If you don’t love your baby it won’t come and visit you when you’re old.”

Now those comments paint a very different picture of a mother from the description in the passage we've just heard from the Book of Proverbs. But I suspect some of you may be thinking that there are quite a few similarities, especially to Penny's suggestion that "Women do the washing up and tidying and men go on the train and get tired."

But that would be to forget that Proverbs was written around three thousand years ago, when society was very different. A typical village might then consist of three or four extended families, with the men working out in the fields in order to earn a livelihood for their families and the women looking after the home and the children, until they were old enough to take their place out in the fields or helping in the house.

In fact, if we read this passage carefully, the woman has a great deal of responsibility. She can decide whether or not to purchase fields and plant gardens or vineyards, as some other translations put it, which will all add to the family's income; she's entitled to trade; and she further contributes to the family's wealth through her dressmaking skills.

And it's interesting that today aid agencies working in developing countries like India find that one of the best ways of improving the quality of life for the families they are supporting is to empower the women by giving them the skills and business training to enable them to set up their own businesses. A woman by the name of Manju, living in Sonipat, India, who was recently trained in tailoring and given a bank loan to enable her to buy a sewing machine and cloth, wrote:

Now I am working as a tailor from my home and earn around 2000 rupees a month. It gives me enormous satisfaction to earn my own money and help to support my family.

But the "good woman" in our reading has other qualities as well. As we have heard, she is hardworking. She is generous towards the poor. And she shares her wisdom with her children, something that they clearly appreciate, for they call her blessed.

It's also worth remembering that the idea of a homemaker being an inferior position to the breadwinner, and your status depending on your career, is very

much a modern idea and current mainly in the Western part of the world. Moreover, there's been a move towards blurring the distinctions between breadwinner and homemaker, so it is much more common now for both partners in a family to have careers and to share the household responsibilities.

There is another important characteristic of the woman described in Proverbs: she fears the Lord, with "fear" referring to the awe and respect that she feels for God. And the love that she demonstrates in the way that she cares for her family is derived from the love that she receives from God, and its importance is recognised by her family, for her husband says:

*Charm can mislead and beauty soon fades.
The woman to be admired and praised
is the woman who lives in the Fear-of-GOD.*

And we can see a similar interaction of love in our gospel reading, where Mary demonstrates her love for Jesus by standing there at the foot of the cross, as he is crucified – something that must have been torture for her – and Jesus returns that love by making arrangements for her to be cared for after he is gone.

So, on this day when we are focusing on mothers, may I encourage you to join with the writer of Proverbs, and thinking of wives, mothers, aunts, grandmothers and other women who have played an important part in our lives, "Give them everything they deserve! Adorn their life with praises!"