
¹ A good name is more desirable than great riches,
and high esteem, than gold and silver.

² Rich and poor have a common bond: the LORD is the maker of them all.

⁸ Those who sow iniquity reap calamity, and the rod used in anger will fail.

⁹ The generous will be blessed, for they share their food with the poor.

²² Do not rob the poor because they are poor, nor crush the needy at the gate;

²³ For the LORD will defend their cause, and will plunder those who plunder them.

Proverbs 22:1-2,8-9,22-23 (NABRE)

Have you ever travelled through a city where people have been begging on the streets? How have you responded to this situation? Do you ask yourself how someone could end up in such a situation? Have you wondered if you should give any money? Have you pondered on the circumstances (including mental health issues) that may see someone begging on the streets?

We all know there are people in need all throughout the world. As we consider wars in Ethiopia in the Tigray region we know a deepening hunger emergency, with about 350,000 people threatened by famine. It is the most severe starvation crisis in the world right now. 133,000 people in Burkina Faso, South Sudan and Yemen are most at risk. Over 20 'hunger hotspots' around the world are expected to encounter an increase in severe food insecurity over the next four months, according to a new report from the United Nations (UN).

Here in Australia organisations such as the Smith Family state that around 1 in 6 Australians live below the poverty line. Furthermore we are all probably aware of some people who are struggling in some way – some who wonder if they will ever be able to buy a home, others who are struggling to pay their bills.

Would you describe yourself as 'rich'? Would you describe yourself as 'poor'? Abraham Lincoln said, "God must love the poor. That is why He made so many of them."

Can poverty ever be overcome? At first glance, it appears Jesus didn't think so. After all, He said (John 12:8), "The poor you will always have with you." But it just so happens that in saying "The poor you will always have with you," Jesus was quoting another well-known Biblical phrase—from a well-known passage of the Jewish Torah. Everyone hearing him back then would have caught his drift. Here's the full original quote: *"If among you, one of your fellow Israelites should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your fellow Israelite, but you shall open your hand to them and lend them sufficient for their need, whatever it may be ... For the poor you will always have with you in the land. Therefore I command you, 'You shall open wide your hand to your fellow Israelites, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.'*" (Deuteronomy 15:7-11)

One thing we can all agree on is that there are poor people who need to be cared for. We may not be able to agree on much, but the responsibility to care for those who are down and out rests on those who have been blessed with much.

In our Bible Reading for today (Proverbs 8:1-2,8-9,22-23) we hear of God's call to help those in need. This Bible Reading comes from the section of the Bible known as 'Wisdom Literature', and 'Wisdom literature' seeks to teach its readers/hearers 'wisdom'; that is, how to live well. This wisdom is handed down from parents to children (1:8) and is based not on revelation but on experience and observation. And ultimately, this 'wisdom' is grounded in a right relationship with God: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (1:7; 9:10; 15:33).

What does it mean to 'live wisely' in this world? As we come to the various verses this day it is important to note that there is a wider context. Proverbs Chapters 10 to 30 are a collection of 'verses' (or 'small sayings') where each verse can be taken on its own. But at the heart of them all is 'the fear' (or 'reverence, honour, awe, respect, acknowledgement of authority) of the Lord. How are we to live 'rightly' (or, 'in a right way') as God's children? There are a number of things we can reflect upon in the Bible verses before us today.

The writer of Proverbs says, "A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favour is better than silver or gold" (22:1).

The Hebrew says, in the second line, "good favour," meaning a good reputation or high esteem. This is not celebrity or fame, with which our culture is so obsessed. It is not based on physical beauty or other qualities. It cannot be "spun" by a good public relations person. A good name, a good reputation, is something earned over many years. It implies integrity, honesty, and responsibility. It cannot be bought. Indeed, it is worth more than all the riches in the world.

The important thing here is not be 'well thought of' by other people. Rather, it is about the inner qualities of a person. Not everyone will like you because you are a Christian. Not everyone will agree with your beliefs and values. As Christians we know that we live in the context of 'spiritual warfare', and our name as Christians may be reviled in the world. But we are called to have a 'good name' in the sight of God'. The question here is one that is well known to us: "Do you intend with the help of the Holy Spirit to live as in God's presence, and to strive daily to lead a holy life, even as Christ has made you holy?"

As we think of what it means to "strive daily to live a holy life" we can also remember the Proverb that says, "The rich and the poor have this in common: the LORD is the maker of them all" (22:2). The Hebrew literally says, "The rich and the poor meet together; the LORD is the maker of them all." The NRSV translation, though, captures the sense of the proverb. (See similar statements in Proverbs 29:13 and Job 31:15.) Depending on one's social position, this proverb inspires either humility or hope. We are not what we have. Our worth is not based on our bank account. We are, at the most basic level, creatures,

fashioned alike by God, the creator of all. When we by chance “meet together”—the janitor and the CEO, the homeless man and the lawyer walking by, the hotel maid and the well-to-do vacationer—we can, if we have eyes to see, we can recognise in each other (if we choose to do so) the face of our brother or sister.

The writer of Proverbs also says, “Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of anger will fail” (22:8). This proverb uses an agricultural image familiar to its original hearers. You reap what you sow. The one who sows injustice or iniquity will (eventually) receive a harvest of trouble. The one who sows foolishness will be caught in their folly. And the power of “his anger” (the Hebrew says) will just fizzle out. There are ample public examples, from Business Leaders, Politicians, Sports Stars, Movie Stars, etc, to show that this proverb is as true now as it was in ancient Israel. It should serve as comfort to the afflicted, and as a warning to all.

The writer of Proverbs also says, “Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor” (22:9). In contrast to the subject of the previous proverb, the person described here is generous, giving of what he or she has to the poor, and being blessed in return. Though no agricultural imagery is used here, one might talk about these two proverbs together; for in this proverb, too, you reap what you sow. In this case, however, the planting and the reaping involve things like generosity, blessing, and bread; things that make for life, for both giver and recipient.

And the writer of Proverbs says, “Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate; for the LORD pleads their cause and despoils of life those who despoil them” (22:22-23).

The specific words used in these verses imply a court setting. The gate was the centre of legal and business activity in a town. In this case, God is both prosecuting attorney and judge. And the crime is robbing the poor “because they are poor.” The poor are particularly vulnerable to exploitation, both in ancient times and today. Think of the prevalence of predatory “payday lenders” in certain urban neighbourhoods, charging incredibly high interest rates because people have nowhere else to turn. Robbing the poor “because they are poor” may seem to be an easy thing to do, but the proverb warns of the consequences: the LORD will ultimately hold to account those who prey on the life of the vulnerable.

There are two things to reflect upon as we apply these verses to our lives. The first is to remember practically what we can do. Someone once said, “Your ‘little’ can mean a lot.” There is a story about a little boy in the gospels who gave his lunch consisting of a few loaves of bread and fish to Jesus. He didn’t sit down and plan for an abundance. He had no idea that he was going to receive twelve baskets of food back. He gave simply because he wanted to help. Likewise, the woman who poured an expensive perfume on Jesus didn’t do it for any other reason than to show her love for Him. We are called to care and to give. But this has to be done wisely and well. There is a short wise saying that says, “Give a

man a fish and he has food for a day, teach a man to fish and he has food for a lifetime." You cannot help everyone, and you are not meant to be taken advantage of (not thinking about your giving). But you are called to care. And we are to remember our 'little can become a lot'.

The other thing we can remember is that for us as God's people is that true giving comes from a grateful heart. Giving to the poor brings a blessing. However, often we give just to get back. This is the wrong motive! Instead, we seek to 'give' out of a grateful heart to for God.

We remember that 'Rich and poor have a common bond', and that also means we are the same before the Lord. We are equally sinners who are equally saved by the love of God as revealed in Christ Jesus. The Bible speaks of how Christ gave up everything so that we can have all things in Him. And by this, it means we have a 'good name' before God because of the love and forgiveness God has given us in Jesus. Before God we are all equally 'poor', in that we all are by nature sinners who 'deserve punishment in time and in eternity'. But we are all equally saved and loved by God in Christ Jesus. Scripture says that Jesus chose to become poor—leaving heaven and everything that belonged to Him as God's Son—so we might become rich (2 Corinthians 8:9).

One Christian writer has said this: "*Jesus is saying that true riches are not a matter of what we control. True riches are a matter of what controls us. God's glorious riches in Christ Jesus are centred in what comes into our lives when we allow Him — His love and truth — to be the controlling centre of our lives.*" In Ephesians 3:8 we hear the Apostle Paul say this: "To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ." Many of us don't realise we're rich, because we think in terms of bank accounts and material possessions. But these things have no eternal value. Our real wealth is found in the spiritual blessings we've been given through Christ.

Because Christ is rich beyond comprehension or measurement, we can have confidence that He has more than enough grace for us. No matter what we have done or left undone, no matter where we have failed or come up short, when we turn to Christ, He is always there for us, always merciful, always gracious, always forgiving. We can never exhaust the riches of Christ given to us.

We are called to give wisely in this world. We rejoice in the riches God has given us in Jesus. "Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift" (2 Cor. 9:15). Amen.

Dear Lord, we think of those in great need. Help us to see the opportunities we have to love and care. Help us also to always trust in Your great power and love. May the riches of Your peace settle over our hearts and minds, in Jesus' name. Amen.