

Value

Proverbs 31:10-31; Mark 9:30-37

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the birth of Muriel Spark, whose many writings include the peerless *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. Set in the 1930s, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* is situated in Edinburgh at the fictional Marcia Blaine School for Girls. We are told the school founder was a nineteenth century wealthy widow who was an admirer of Garibaldi, the Italian soldier and politician not the biscuit, and inscribed under her portrait is a quotation from the Book of Proverbs, “*Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies.*”ⁱ

The headmistress of the school uses it as a mantra each time the *avant-garde* Miss Brodie and her progressive teaching methods went a little too far. Miss Brodie is seen as the antithesis of virtue. Certainly her espousing of the causes of Mussolini, Franco, and Hitler, however naïvely, as well as other activities, push her well beyond accepted norms of virtue in any age.

Questions remain, however. What is the price, or better, value of the virtuous woman, or man, in the twenty-first century if it is not measured in rubies? Does virtue have a price, or a value?

Of course, there are other ways to translate the word virtue. Some translations of this poem in Proverbs offer ‘good’, or ‘capable’ as a way of interpreting the word. “But the Hebrew carries a far strong meaning. The woman is more literally a “strong woman,” a “woman of worth,” a “warrior-like woman.” She is a mysterious figure who greatly rewards anyone who settles down to live in her household.”ⁱⁱ This woman is a woman of substance and property. She shows leadership and business acumen. She is comfortable within herself and her qualities include speaking kindness and uttering wisdom. She is, as part of a major theme in Proverbs, the embodiment of Wisdom, and that embodiment is female.

Are these qualities of hard work, foresight, kindness and wisdom what we value in a person today?

Redressing the gender balance, we sang in Psalm 1 about the blessed man who also embraces wisdom, not simply the teaching of God’s law and ways but the living out of those ways. Like a

tree planted by the river, such a person provides shelter and nurture and gives life. Like the capable woman in Proverbs, the blessed man in the Psalms is an aspiration and encouragement to every faithful person. When we walk with God, and put God's ways of loving kindness, mercy and generosity into practice then we reveal not only our virtue, our high moral standards and behaviour, but also our value, and our true worth. Far above rubies, greater than silver and gold.

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus moved from Galilee and turned His face towards Jerusalem, the cross and the empty tomb. Who you think you are and what you think you are begins to matter more and more. Against the determination of Jesus to offer salvation to the world through death and life is set the bickering of the disciples about whom one amongst them is the most important. Jesus' response to whom and what is of value is radical. He sits His closest followers down, and might as well have said, as one commentator puts it: "Right, we stop here and we thrash things out and we get this straight. In this new community (which we will call the church), 'the first shall be last and servant of all. And just to make sure you understand, here's a picture you will never forget.' He took a child, set him in the midst of all those grown men. Put His arm around him and said, 'Whoever welcomes in My Name one of the children, welcomes Me, and whoever welcomes Me welcomes also the One Who sent Me.'"ⁱⁱⁱ

Who and what is of ultimate value in the Kingdom? A child, the last, the least, the 'least of the least' with no status and no apparent value, yet in the eyes of God, of the greatest value.

If we are to reckon what our value to God is in God's Kingdom, it will be reckoned by our service, our kindness, our compassion, our self-effacement, our ability to put others before ourselves, and our willingness to engage with the upside-down hospitality of the Kingdom of God, where those of greatest value are the ones who give the most of themselves in the service of others.

In the play, *Lady Windemere's Fan*, Oscar Wilde had one of its characters, Lord Darlington, quip that a cynic was "a man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing." In our world today, cynical as it often can appear, I wonder if that comment applies universally? Where

time is money, where we judge someone's value by what they wear, where they went to school and university, the car they drive, the location of their home, the job they have, how often is the real value, the real worth of each and every human we encounter valued by the price of rubies and not the quality of their soul or the abundance of their compassion or the readiness to be of selfless service to others?

What is of value to the world, what is of importance and substance does not necessarily equate too much in the Kingdom of God. It is not that the things of the world do not matter or have no worth, if shared generously, it is that value, real value, comes from how we behave towards one another, and how we set our priorities for living.

In a sense, none of this is rocket science. We all know it when we see it in others; we also know that it is perfectly possible for us to achieve. The question remains – do we choose this lifestyle? Do we make those Kingdom decisions about how we shape our thoughts, words and actions?

In the world of politics, do those who espouse Christian values practice these lifestyle choices, which reveal their true value, just as their lack of choice reveals their lesser value? In the world of the Church, do our Church leaders practise these lifestyle choices? Or in the world of education, or business, or social services, or the arts, or retail.

Value, real value, is not measured by the price of rubies. Strength, worth, courage, wisdom, compassion, generosity, kindness, encouragement are far above precious stones when it comes to estimating the true value of each human soul.

The person quietly visiting an isolated soul who has not family or friends and would go from one week to the next without seeing another friendly face.

The person buying extra when out shopping so that a foodbank might have a little more to share.

The person making a donation towards an unsexy charity that doesn't attract big money or publicity but whose work changes lives.

The person who notices someone struggling at work, or at life, and takes time to get alongside and help.

The person going the second mile. The person who gives away a coat. The person who shares a meal. The person who gives a drink. The person who offers a welcome. The person who visits in hospital. The person who visits in prison.

As we do it to the least, so we do it to Jesus. As we give of ourselves, so the extent of our value in the economy of God's Kingdom is realised.

Not on the stock exchange or in a bank balance, not in a jeweller's vault with the emeralds and sapphires and rubies. But in the market place of human experience, where the workaday encounters take place, and little acts of kindness reveal a richness of spiritual value that money cannot buy.

As we give of ourselves, so our value becomes evident. As we give of ourselves, so the currency of kindness, the imprint of Christ, is seen as the coin of our lifestyle. No easily quantifiable price, but a price far above rubies in the Kingdom of God.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Authorised Version, Proverbs 31:10

ⁱⁱ Kathleen M O'Connor, Feasting on the Word, Year B Vol 4, p75

ⁱⁱⁱ Leith Fisher, Will you follow Me? Exploring the Gospel of Mark, p135