

Proverbs 11:22
More than skin deep

You have undoubtedly heard over the last few weeks that prices are rising. At the **petrol pumps**, particularly, that war in Ukraine, and the effect it has had on our oil supplies, have caused record highs.

But we're told that **inflation**, generally, is at its highest for decades. Suppliers of all sorts of goods are saying that their own costs are rising, and all they can do is pass on the rises to the eventual consumers of their goods. On Friday it was **milk**, according to BBC Breakfast News. Another day, it will be something else.

And there's undoubtedly a further consequence to all of this: pay rises - or at least **pay claims**. Generally speaking, whatever level inflation is, people will be looking for pay rises of the same amount ... and probably a little bit more. Back when Jenny and I bought our **first house** in 1982, inflation was way higher than it is even now, up around 10 or 12%, I think it was. The *up* side of that is that I can remember a pay rise of 15%, at one stage - and after a few years of that, our initial mortgage payments dropped quite rapidly in comparison.

With pay negotiations, though, there's always quite a bit of dispute. Who's to say which jobs are really comparable, and therefore should be remunerated equivalently? Is a **nurse's** job equivalent to a **teacher's**? How do - or how *should* - those compare with **plumbers** or **policemen** or **politicians**?

And then we hear about the unpaid roles, rather than jobs, in society nowadays. All the unpaid **carers**, looking after the people who for one reason or another haven't been granted this or that allowance from the State. But shouldn't their contributions be recognised in some way - even if not financially?

But there's another group who, down through the centuries, have been unpaid deliverers of care, often over a period of decades. That's what this Sunday is about. Not that there aren't other people who serve quite heroically, but, when it comes to childcare, it's usually just expected, and perhaps not properly noticed or appreciated. It's the role of being a **mother**.

It's really rather sad that if you convert that word into a verb, it starts to imply doing too much, and even harming your child. Why is this **guy** such a wimp? It's because he was *mothered* when he was a kid. On the other hand, *fathering* a child doesn't necessarily imply contributing *anything* much at all to that child's upbringing.

But when you come to the Bible, the role of mother is a very honourable profession. Worth spending a Sunday to recognise, with **Mothers' Day**. "Mothering Sunday" does sound a bit old-fashioned and a bit twee to me nowadays, fussily precise - like we had a gran in our previous church who would always **look daggers** at anyone who dared to call her grandson Ben instead of the full and proper Benjamin.

There's a notion going around nowadays that the Bible is all very down on women. And while it's probably true that over the years, the work of women in the church has been far too greatly overlooked, if you get back to the Bible, that's not what you see. You get something like this, for example - showing a difference but also an equality between men and women.

Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honour to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.

(1 Peter 3:7)

And there's that long passage that we read together back in Proverbs, showing just what admirable qualities a woman can have - even in societies that we maybe think are very male-dominated.

She is like the ships of the merchant; she brings her food from afar. She rises while it is yet night and provides food for her household and portions for her maidens.

(Proverbs 31:14-15)

She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard. She dresses herself with strength and makes her arms strong.

(Proverbs 31:16-17)

By the way, ladies, don't think that Proverbs 31 is a **list** for which you need to put a tick in each and every box. That would just be totally overwhelming. Rather, I take it that it's just a selection of some of the sorts of things that a wise and trustworthy woman might turn her hand to. The end result is entirely appropriate, even if you have failed by being unable to include managing a **portfolio of shares online** in between the outbursts of **noise from the baby's bedroom** in the middle of the night.

Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: "Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all."

(Proverbs 31:28-29)

And the role isn't a short-term one, either. It's sometimes said that "**you're never happier than your unhappiest child**", and I'd suggest that, even if you shouldn't take that as an absolute guide to life as a parent, it's quite possibly one that mothers feel even more acutely than fathers. See this quote from Isaiah, 600 or so BC, specifying the *mother's* affections as being durable and consistent.

But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me." "Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you."

(Isaiah 49:14-15)

But let's come back to Proverbs again now. Those verses celebrating the excellencies of not just a successful woman, did you note, but a **godly** one ...

Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.

(Proverbs 31:30)

... that's a glorious conclusion to the book. But it's not a book that you'd tend to read just straight through, from cover to cover. It's not built that way.

After a few verses of introduction, the first few chapters are *passages* of writing, often thought of as a father instructing his son, but look at how it actually starts:

Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and forsake not your mother's teaching, for they are a graceful garland for your head and pendants for your neck. My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent. ...

(Proverbs 1:8-10)

Following on from that, you get a section where wisdom is personified as a *woman*, giving wise advice to any who will listen:

Wisdom cries aloud in the street, in the markets she raises her voice; at the head of the noisy streets she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:

"How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge? If you turn at my reproof, behold, I will pour out my spirit to you; I will make my words known to you.

(Proverbs 1:20-23)

And I confess I do rather like that balance, right from the beginning. Wisdom personified not as a wise old man, but a *woman*. Does that give the impression, perhaps, that true wisdom might be well learned right from the start, just like that hymn we sang earlier put it:

*Who from our mothers' arms
Hath blessed us on our way*

So a *mother's* job, Scripturally speaking, isn't just feeding and changing, but teaching right from the word *Go*. So much of our outlook on life is not specifically taught, but rather it's *caught* - we see it in our parents and just assume that is how life is and should be. At that very young age we have no experience of things being done differently ... so what you see in your home ... in your father and maybe even more in your mother, *that's* what will form the bedrock of your understanding of the world around.

I don't want to share a grievous moral misunderstanding that we inflicted upon our kids, but one day Jo - young teenager, perhaps? - came home just a little bit embarrassed, because she had been out somewhere with some friend or other, and

been given **macaroni cheese** to eat ... and asked *But where are the bits of sausage?* No, it's not quite **Masterchef**, but that's the way we made it at home ... so Jo had grown up thinking that was *the* way it was made.

And kids will grow up thinking that the world *is* the way they have been taught it, deliberately or unintentionally, by the words and deeds and attitudes they have seen in their homes.

But Proverbs, the book, again. So there are longer speeches and articles, I suppose you could call them - although packaged into a more poetic form. But most of the middle of the book seems to be a fairly random selection of ... well, as the name suggests, Proverbs. Typically stand-alone nuggets of wisdom. And these fit under the introductory description of what to expect in the book, too:

***To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight,
to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and
equity;
to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth —***
(Proverbs 1:2-4)

And all of this falls under a single verse by way of summary:

***The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise
wisdom and instruction.***
(Proverbs 1:7)

All of this is only of any real value if you have the basic foundation for life in place: knowing God, a relationship with God himself - and in the NT we see that that is only possible through who Jesus Christ is, and what he has done ... and our response to bow before those facts and individually and personally receive him as Thomas finally did, after the resurrection:

Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"
(John 20:28)

But this central section of Proverbs contains an amazing breadth and variety of individual wise sayings. Some of them seem really almost too obvious to include. Others are wonderfully witty, with more twists than you might have thought were possible in a single sentence.

For one that is almost too obvious, what about this one?

A faithful witness does not lie, but a false witness breathes out lies.
(Proverbs 14:5)

Isn't that a totally obvious contrast? Is it even worth including here? But then, maybe we should consider that the phrase ***breathes out lies*** occurs *five* times in this book. And then I stopped and thought about that a bit. "Breathes out lies" gives the impression that people like that, *with every breath* (yes, a bit of poetic exaggeration ... but do

you get it?) contaminate the air around them with lies. A bit like people who have eaten too much **garlic**, and it's not just that they continually exhale the odour: it even oozes out of their pores when they sweat.

On the subject of sulphur compounds, I remember hearing about something along these lines back in the labs. Some mischievous guy wondered what would happen if you mixed another solvent, dimethyl sulphoxide, in with the water of a **plant** (some kind of succulent, I think it was) that, bizarrely, they kept in the lab. Actually, the plant got the last laugh. It slowly metabolised it into dimethyl sulphide, which is pretty much the smell of rotten cabbage, and stank the place out for weeks afterwards. But it's quite a good picture of "breathing out lies", I thought.

So some of these proverbs need soaking for a while, to let the full taste emerge. Others you might get more immediately, but only after they have deliberately wrong-footed you. This one is brilliant. Turn on your imaginations now.

Like a thorn that goes up into the hand ... of a drunkard is a proverb in the mouth of fools.

(Proverbs 26:9)

Pausing part-way into it, are you starting to wince? The mental picture you have screams *pain!!!* But no, it's a much more sneaky proverb this one. A few more words knock us off-balance: **of a drunkard**. So now the picture is the curious one of situation that *ought* to be extremely painful ... but isn't. The alcohol acts as a kind of anaesthetic - like when the surgeon-barbers of old used to get their patients (or victims, maybe?) rolling drunk before amputating their leg.

And now we're ready to be shown what this contradictory picture is **like**. Here's the rest of the verse: **... is a proverb in the mouth of fools**. I'll leave you to think that one through for some homework, if you like. Because I want to take you to a final one of these one-liner proverbs, which I've chosen for this morning. It's another one that deliberately mentally yanks us around in several directions before delivering its punch-line. Ready with your imaginations again?

Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman without discretion.

(Proverbs 11:22)

OK, got that. Something rather splendid and attractive and precious, right? Remember how that line always stands out in the middle of the Christmas carol: **five gold rings!** Sorry, everyone, we're looking in the obvious ... but *wrong* ... direction. It's nothing like that at all. A gold ring belongs on the finger of a fair maiden, perhaps. But that is not what follows here.

Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman without discretion.

(Proverbs 11:22)

And even if you don't see this so much in modern farming, I suppose we know that putting a ring through a pig's nose *used to be done*. It presumably makes the pig much more controllable. If you attach some kind of lead or chain to the ring, that pig is not going to go charging around all over the place and risk the agony of pulling against that ring in a very sensitive area.

It's different with people, though. Personally, I don't quite get it, though it's becoming reasonably main-stream in our own culture nowadays. **Earrings**, I get. **Nose rings**, though ... I just wonder what happens when someone has a cold. But in various cultures down through the ages, a nose ring was considered a very fetching adornment. Here's an engagement present for Rebekah:

Then I asked her, 'Whose daughter are you?' She said, 'The daughter of Bethuel, Nahor's son, whom Milcah bore to him.' So I put the ring on her nose and the bracelets on her arms.

(Genesis 24:47)

And you could certainly imagine that as being something very appropriate to fashion out of gold. Which means that our proverb is pointing out something ridiculously inappropriate and incongruous. This is something absurd. *A pig's snout* does not befit precious gold jewellery. It's ridiculously out of place.

Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman without discretion.

(Proverbs 11:22)

I hope that by now - since I've deliberately paused at this point in the sentence, and strung it out as long as I dare - you must be asking me (just as the writer intended by writing it this way) ... yes, but *just what* is "like a gold ring in a pig's snout". Here's the answer.

Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman without discretion.

(Proverbs 11:22)

Let's line it up to make sure we think this through right. The gold ring = the beautiful woman. Attractive, desirable, precious. But we don't have the full picture yet; we don't have the context. When we're told the context, it's something jarring. The gold ring, covered with what a pig's snout is usually associated with, suddenly becomes far less desirable. And ... can that happen with a woman's beauty?

Do any of you remember this advert from way, way back? The actress **Lorraine Chase** now appears in Emmerdale, but she was originally noticed in an advert for Campari. Apparently a beautiful exotic woman ... until she asks for her Campari to be mixed *wiv lemoniyde* ... and confesses that she has not arrived at this glorious sunlit villa from some trendy distant foreign location, but from *Lu'un Airpawt*.

And it's the same kind of disconnection in this verse in Proverbs. There is something that just doesn't fit, when you compare the appearance and the actions.

Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman without discretion.

(Proverbs 11:22)

It's tricky when you have to translate from one language into another, and you have to plump for just a single word. In this case, the word that is translated here as "discretion" has a bit of breadth of meaning. It can mean the literal taste of

something. It can refer to someone's behaviour, generally, of any kind. It can mean wise, timely, necessary advice: David to Abigail, who had talked David down from murdering her husband Nabal:

“Blessed be your discretion, and blessed be you, who have kept me this day from bloodguilt ...”

(1 Samuel 25:33)

It can be another word for simply wise conduct or good sense:

Teach me good judgement and knowledge, for I believe in your commandments.

(Psalms 119:66)

The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can answer sensibly.

(Proverbs 26:16)

So what's our Proverb actually saying?

Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman without discretion.

(Proverbs 11:22)

We've got something like it in “**Don't judge a book by its cover**”. It's as with our **title** for today. See, we did get to it eventually! We've got it worked through in quite a bit of detail in the NT.

Do not let your adorning be external — the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewellery, or the clothing you wear — but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious.

(1 Peter 3:3-4)

And maybe that message is not just relevant to the mothers here today, but all of us. But we'll start with mums.

So maybe there was a time when you could pay the attention you would like to your looks. These verses don't speak out against that, so long as it's kept in its place. So long as appearance doesn't become more important to us than the reality. So long as we don't concentrate on outward beauty at the expense of inward beauty.

Quite possibly, when you become a mum, you just don't have time or energy, or just the budget, to attend to the outward so much. If you're struggling with child-care, as so many parents are nowadays, and by some miracle you get an evening to yourself, you're far more likely to crash out on the settee than glam up and hit the town.

And as the years go by, it could be that you think that the goods are starting to approach their sell-by date. Gravity starts to take its toll. Joints start to creak. And

you never really liked those heels anyway. So ... is it all downhill now? Not if our focus is where it *should* be.

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.

(2 Corinthians 4:16)

For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

(2 Corinthians 4:17-18)

We can come back to the penultimate verse of Proverbs again:

Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.

(Proverbs 31:30)

And guys, it applies to us, too. Could we maybe re-work 11:22?

Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman without discretion.

(Proverbs 11:22)

Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is ... the **perfectly toned body** without common sense.

Or maybe more generally to us all?

Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is ... to live for today, but to forget eternity.

Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is ... to live for outward appearance, but to neglect inner truth.

Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is ... to live for yourself, but to ignore Jesus Christ.

Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is ... No; maybe we should give Jesus the final word here:

“For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?”

(Matthew 16:25-26)