

# **Reflection on Sunday 22 Sept 2024**

## **by Maria Henriksson-Bell, Pioneer Lay Leader**

*Readings: Proverbs 31. 10-31 & Mark 9. 31-37*

Good morning. Your reaction to the next few words will reveal if you or your relatives have been on TikTok a lot recently. Don't worry if you don't get the reference, it will be explained.

"I'm looking for a man in finance, trust fund, 6.5", blue eyes."

You may or may not recognise this as the audio that went viral on TikTok this summer. Content creator Megan Boni is poking fun at people looking for love with a list of very specific criteria.

It is an illustration of some things we admire - physical qualities, financial stability, winners, power and people who seem very on top of life.

To this day, we are impressed with the wife depicted in Proverbs, and rightly so. It is a depiction of an eminently capable woman. She has a good marriage, she can spin, weave, sew, cook, run a household, run a business and make wise financial decisions. She keeps physically fit and she is well dressed.

In many ways, she resembles the trending phenomenon of the Instagram 'trad wife', which is rightly critiqued as setting impossibly high and restrictive standards for women. But a notable difference is that, in this over 2500-year-old account, there is no mention of physical beauty. In fact, we are reminded that "charm is deceitful and beauty is in vain." We are also encouraged to admire

qualities like strength, dignity and wisdom as well as generosity to those in need. Impressive stuff.

In today's reading from the Gospel of Mark, the disciples argue about who is the greatest among them. Who is indeed the most impressive.

We don't know exactly how the conversation would have gone, but we can imagine great contributions to charity weighed against deep spirituality; excellent knowledge of scripture weighed against acts of service.

In Matthew's account of the same incident, they were discussing who was the "greatest in the kingdom of God", but Mark's account leaves more scope for the imagination.

It might be that the disciples were discussing much more superficial things like, 'Who is the greatest - the one with brain or the one with brawn?'

They were, after all, living in the Roman society where to be a hero, you didn't need to be a good person, you just needed to be brave, strong and devoted to Rome.

Jesus doesn't get into the argument, but he does put things in a new perspective: "Whoever wants to be the first must be the last of all and the servant to all."

We can read this today as: If we want to be the most impressive, we are asked to be the most humble and the most focused on the needs of others.

Regardless of whether we want to be impressive or not, that principle of serving others and putting the needs of others before ourselves is what matters. It was a new idea at the time of Jesus and is still radical and countercultural today.

And that brings us to what has been a theme across Hertford and the church recently: environmental sustainability.

A definition of sustainability is: 'The management of resources to fulfil our present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs'. Sustainably also takes economy and social justice into account.

Sustainability is concern for "the least of these", as it is children, the elderly and the poor who are most affected globally by pollution and most affected by extremes in temperature.

I'm going to share some of an article I wrote a couple of years ago and this is very specifically some ideas on the ethics of shopping.

The article was called Shopping Without Costing the Earth.

Take a while to think through your values.

How concerned are you about climate change?

Are you concerned about child labour and modern slavery?

Does the suffering of animals trouble you?

Are there countries with poor human rights records that you wish to boycott?

My first encounter with consumer choice as faith motivated activism was when my mother, in the 1980s, slightly louder than necessary, explained that we didn't buy apples from South Africa because they didn't treat their people right. It

was only years later I learned in more detail about the grave injustices of Apartheid, but at the time “not treating people right” seemed ample reason to steer clear of a product, company or country of origin.

We are now in an unprecedented time of Climate Crisis. You’ll have heard of modern slavery and sweatshops, too.

The good news is that we have the power to influence countries and companies to do better by choosing eco friendly and cruelty free products.

Here are seven ideas to explore when we buy things:

1. Stop and think first. Do you really need to own the product? Can you borrow or hire it? Can you source it second hand? Could you make it yourself?
2. Make the changes you can. Those with the biggest budgets have the biggest responsibility and the most ability to make a change. If you have a big budget, make a big change. If your budget is more modest, make more modest changes. Can you opt for Fairtrade and organic some of the time or maybe choose just one or two products that you always buy organic? If you buy nothing else organic, I recommend milk. It is better for you, the planet and our farmers.
3. Buy less and buy better. Buy things of good quality in shapes and colours you’ll enjoy for a long time. Ask for advice if you need to, especially if your budget is modest and the purchase is a major investment.
4. Pay attention to where things are made. Things that are made in the UK and other parts of Europe have a lower transport carbon footprint than things made elsewhere. Though sweatshops have been found in

Europe, pay and working conditions tend to be better, as are environmental standards, as a rule.

5. If in doubt opt out. This principle is for those prepared for some serious commitment. If you do not feel 100% sure the product you are about to buy wasn't made in a sweatshop, using child labour or forced labour, don't buy the product. If in doubt, opt out. If you do not feel 100% certain that the material and the production followed best environmental practice, don't buy the product. If in doubt, opt out. However, there will be times when you have no option but to buy the mass produced item Made in China, for instance. Don't beat yourself up, but don't give up on trying to shop responsibly and sustainably.
6. Communicate. Ask those you know who have high ethical standards for advice. You might make a new friend! Ask in shops if you can't find information on the label, or call up the company. As a rule, manufacturers with high ethical standards give good customer service and larger companies do pay attention when customers start asking questions.
7. Share your knowledge. If you hear of poor working conditions or companies breaking the law, abusing animals or having poor environmental standards, talk about it. When you find a good product, fairly traded and/or organic, let people know.

For many of us, these principles of doing least harm and practicing solidarity are expressions of faith, of following the teaching of Christ by putting the needs of others first, even if they are on the other side of the the world.

Reflecting on our impact on Creation and our duties towards those we share this planet with can be a way of

prayerfully communing with the God of justice, peace and compassion.

Let us pray.

*God of justice, send your visions for the world as it should be.*

*Christ who knew suffering and yet triumphed, give us strength to dare to care.*

*Holy Spirit, renew our compassion with your Creation.*

*Amen*