

In today's gospel we heard about "talents". Although the scriptural meaning of "talent" as currency to be invested and not buried, is not the same meaning we have for talent or gift, it's difficult to hear the passage without thinking about the talents we have each been given. There are many talented people in our parish. One of our very talented and wise women is Lizzie Berne Degear who teaches bible study here at the parish. Here is her translation of the Proverbs passage and her commentary.

A reading from the book of Proverbs

A woman of force – who can find her?

Her self-worth is far beyond rubies.

Her spouse's mind and heart trust in her

thus he will never lack for spoils.

She weans him well,

and all the days of her life are free from vice.

She seeks wool and flax;

With pleasure, she creates with her hands.

She is like a whole fleet of trade ships

From afar she brings her sustenance;

She rises while it is still night

To her household, she gives meat;
and to those who work for her, she gives what is due.

She evaluates a plot of land
And with her earnings, she buys it. She plants a vineyard.

She girds her loins with strength.

She strengthens her arms.

She savors the goodness of her profits

Her lamp does not go out at night.

In her hand she holds the distaff

And grasps the spindle with her fingers.

She spreads her palms open to the poor

And extends her hands to the needy.

She fears not for her household when it snows

For all of them are clothed in scarlet

She makes herself coverings of tapestries

Her clothing is fine linen and purple.

Her husband is well-known at the gates

Where his seat is among the elders of the land.

Fine linen she makes and sells

Apparel she brings to the merchants.
Strength and honor are her clothing;
She shall rejoice in times to come!

She opens her mouth in wisdom
Sacred words of lovingkindness upon her tongue.
She keeps watch over the ways of her household
And she eats not the bread of idleness.
Her children rise up and call her blessed
Her spouse – he sings her praises!

Many daughters make a force
And you! You can rise high upon all their shoulders.

Favor in another's eyes is a mirage. Beauty is empty.

A Woman who bows only to God -- She is praised!

Give her the fruit of her hands.

And let her own works praise her in the gates!

In today's gospel reading Jesus reminds us that our talents --all that God has bestowed upon us, and all that we have worked so hard to achieve -- are not meant to be buried.

And so, we are taking that to heart today and unearthing some buried talents. Something beautiful that has been buried in our Bible all along. The first reading which we all just heard is a translation of the poem that ends the book of Proverbs.

As a biblical scholar, I have been studying and translating this poem for years.

Perhaps hearing the whole poem, in this new translation, was strangely unfamiliar to you. As John Uehlein put it, "We've been hearing about the worthy wife for years."

Well, if there's one thing I absolutely love about the good news of Jesus Christ, it is that you can recognize it when you come across it, because it is always GOOD, and it is continually NEW.

So here is some new information for you about Proverbs 31:

*This bit of Scripture was originally likely a chant or a song.

*It was written by women, and for women.

*It is an acrostic -- the twenty-two lines of the poem each begin with one of the 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet, starting with the first Hebrew letter -- *alef* -- and going letter by letter, line by line, to the last -- *tav*.

*As you listened did you notice words and phrases that invoked various textiles, tapestries, garments, wool, linen, flax and so on? Did you catch mention of the distaff and the spindle, of selling to merchants, and savoring profits? That is because this poem was

taught and sung in the context of a guild of weavers -- women who were textile manufacturers and business owners.

*The Hebrew title of the poem -- the phrase that the poem begins with -- that starts with the letter *alef* -- and that is the theme for the entire song -- is *asheth chayil*. *Asheth Chayil* is often translated as “Woman of Valor” or, less accurately, “Worthy Wife.”

I’ve been teaching Bible Studies here at Xavier since 2002, and one thing we love doing is delving into particular Hebrew and Greek words and phrases -- exploring their meanings, the various ways these words are used in the Old and New Testaments. The experience of exploring is like taking a time machine to the ancient world, And it can also allow us to go more deeply into the mystical and spiritual aspects of our Scripture.

So let’s do that now with this one phrase *asheth chayil*. *Asheth* -- the first word of the poem, means Woman.

Chayil [rhymes with pie-eel, and starts with the same sound as Chanukah, chutzpah and challah] is a truly fascinating word that appears in the Bible hundreds of times. It has shades of meaning, depending on its context. And this wonderful poem plays on all of them. As you heard, I have chosen to translate *esheth chayil* as *woman of force*. This English word “force” seems to be as close as we can come to a word that encompasses the various meanings of *chayil*. In the Bible *chayil* is used most often as the word for **army**. The English word “force” is also used in military contexts, as when we speak of our armed *forces*. As you listened to this poem did you take note of images of arms, of hands, of fingers? “She girds her loins in strength. She strengthens her arms.” *Chayil* is also used in the Bible to describe a person’s **power** -- one’s strength, one’s might, one’s wealth-- The word “force” works this way too, as in: “this woman is a *force* to be reckoned with.” And, lastly, *chayil* is understood as a **spiritual force** -- one associated with great

warriors who show valour in action, and used to describe connection to a higher power. Apparently, in a galaxy far, far away they call this “the Force.”

So, let us imagine women working and singing together. These women saw themselves as daughters of a guild -- of a workforce-- who gained strength from their collective union; who used this song to inspire and educate the next generation of strong women. Just as the poem begins with one woman of *chayil* -- of force -- so it ends with the statement that “many daughters make *chayil*.”

Together today we listen to these daughters of the ancient world speaking to each other, and speaking to us.

Just this week, the Xavier Bible Study completed its most recent program. It was a 7-week Social Justice Study done in collaboration with Xavier’s wonderful Peace and Justice Committee and with our equally wonderful Associate Pastor, Dan Corrou. We learned about Catholic Social Teachings. And now that I know more about Catholic Social Teachings, I must say I hear all of them echoed back to us through the *asheth chayil* !

This Scripture passage we heard here today connects us with women -- people -- in **solidarity** with each other, taking **responsibility**, embracing the **dignity of work** and the **dignity of workers**, contributing to the larger **community**, noting that they have an **obligation to those in need**, calling for **economic justice**, claiming their **rights**, embracing and enjoying their **creativity**, their **lives**.

As I sat with the “asheth chayil” in preparation for our gathering here today, there was another phrase that kept coming to me. Body of Christ.

I couldn’t shake the feeling of a profound connection between the two.

Asheth chayil. Body of Christ.

We've all heard the Bible referred to as the Living Word. And for me, Scripture is truly alive.

And we've all heard Jesus referred to as Word made Flesh.

As wonderful as it is to delve into Scripture and to translate the Bible, we all, each week, are part of a translation truly miraculous. Don't we all -- right here -- take a time machine to a moment when a person, gathered with friends over dinner on the most difficult night of their lives, said simply, "this is my body, which will be given up for you. Do this in memory of me."

With our presence, with our faith, and with our presider, we participate in a translation so powerful -- so filled with *chayil* -- that it has its own definition. Transubstantiation.

Each week we hear that phrase -- Body of Christ -- spoken to *each* of us *in particular*. We take it in -- through our ears, and through our mouths. We become part of a translation in which word becomes flesh. Our flesh. Together we accept the daunting reality of becoming the living body of Christ.

Like those daughters who saw themselves united as one force, we too are united in a force. Like cells in a body. And we all know what that force is.

That force is love.

Today you have heard my translation of "esheth chayil" and now I ask you for your translation of another phrase. What does it mean when Jesus says to you, "Do this in memory of me?" What exactly is the *this*?

In the coming week, once your body has translated host into your own living cells, will you find yourself taking action in some surprising way... that is new... that is good...? And when you do, will those words come back to you: “Do this in memory of me.” That moment will be your unique translation. And that is my kind of Scripture.