

Church at home

East Leake Methodist Church 2020

Sit comfortably in a quiet place and prepare, start with a brief period of silence, turning your mind and spirit towards God. You may want to have a cross or candle in view as a focus.

Opening Sentence

God who is One,
you create us in diversity.
God who is Three, draw us into unity.

Hymn StF 148 Come, let us with our Lord arise (Sussex Carol)

Opening Prayers

Gracious and righteous God,
we praise you that you are always active -
moving throughout history,
working in our individual lives,
striving to work out your purposes.
You are not remote or detached from our world,
holding yourself aloof from our human condition,
unconcerned about our daily affairs,
but intimately involved in every aspect of our experience.

Gracious and righteous God,
we rejoice in your eternal purpose.

We praise you for your immeasurable love,
always watching over us,
constantly reaching out to bless,
daily by our sides.
You are a God full of mercy,
always ready to forgive,
always prepared to give us the benefit of the doubt,
always eager to wipe the slate clean and start again.

Gracious and righteous God,
we rejoice at your amazing grace.

Forgive us that because of all that
we can sometimes become over-familiar with you -
losing sight of your holiness,
forgetting your commandments,

becoming careless in our discipleship.
Forgive us that we can lose our sense of wonder -
no longer open to all you can do amongst us,
no longer expecting the unexpected,
no longer a people with the courage to dream dreams.

Gracious and righteous God,
we rejoice in the forgiveness you offer.

You are all-good and all-righteous -
stretching out your hand in judgement,
punishing wrong-doing,
destroying evil.
You are all-loving and all-powerful -
reaching out your hand to bless,
to reward faithfulness,
to vindicate truth.

Gracious and righteous God,
we rejoice in your awesome goodness.

Save us from becoming complacent
about judgement and grace -
from imagining our thoughts or actions
do not matter to you,
from becoming apathetic or defeatist in our mentality,
from losing heart when evil appears to triumph over good.
Help us to recognise the destructive consequences
of our sinfulness,
to see our faults and to confess them honestly to you,
to discover the joy that comes from being at one with you,
and to look forward to that day
when your will shall be done and your kingdom come,

Gracious and righteous God,
we rejoice in the certainty of your final triumph,

through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Reading Ruth Chapters 3 & 4

Address – Threads

The book of Ruth is a short story, one of a handful we find in the Old Testament. It is told from a human point of view; actions are sometimes ambiguous; motives mixed; and behaviour is not always noble. Like most narratives the writer assumes a degree of knowledge from the reader, so not everything is fully explained, and descriptions are often terse. This can make it difficult for a reader from a different culture with a different language to understand the story in all its detail. The story itself is not a simple tale – there are threads that run through it like the strands of a rope. Those threads can often say more to our contemporary situation than the simple tale. So in looking at the last two chapters of

Ruth I want to pick up a number of threads, some of which have already been mentioned by Angela in her address last week and follow those through, rather than give a commentary.

Thread one – the immigrant.

When Naomi returns with Ruth to Bethlehem after the period of famine she is recognised by her old community – but they don't go out of their way to help her. She and Ruth must fend for themselves in a society where there are no arrangements to look after vulnerable individuals – and as widows both women are vulnerable – beyond what is written in the Mosaic Law. Why do they act with such indifference? A possible answer is that Naomi abandoned her community when things got tough and went to a foreign land with a husband and sons. She is returning as an expat when things get a bit better, instead of working through the difficulties within her community. And she's bringing back with her an immigrant worker – Ruth – who is of a different culture and religion. This attitude doesn't change much throughout the story. Even when Naomi and Ruth are on the point of running out of food, the community doesn't rally round. When Ruth goes out to glean in the fields there is a suggestion that because she's gleaning in between the stacks of grain, that she may be abusing the welfare system prescribed by the Mosaic Law by pulling out a bit of extra grain for herself. The men may have noticed this and grumbled to Boaz about what she's doing. His actions in endorsing her practice and telling his men to encourage it by being less careful with their harvesting could be seen as being "soft" with the foreigner. When Boaz decides to marry Ruth deals with the "scandal" of marrying a foreigner by lying; saying that the person who redeems the land that Naomi owns must also make a levirate marriage with Ruth. The levirate marriage was set out in the Law to cover the situation where a man died without having children. It was the obligation of the man's brothers to marry the widow so that their children would inherit the land of the dead man. This recognised that God had given the land to the people of Israel and was intended to ensure that land was retained within the family the people of Israel who it had been given. To allow the land to pass to another person was to reject the gift of God. The hostile attitude can finally be seen when Ruth gives birth to a son. The people do not say that Ruth has a son, they say that Naomi has had a son who will look after her. Their attitude to the immigrant remains at best indifferent, at worst hostile. The parallels between the story of Ruth and the situation of immigrants in our own day are quite plain. It seems that we don't want people to come; if they do come we don't want them abusing our welfare system for their own benefit even if it's to look after their family; and even if we recognise their loyalty and their care for other people (as has been the case in the numerous foreign workers the NHS recently) would still prefer that our own community did these jobs – even if there's no sign of people in the local community wanting to do them. And we still refer to marriages between people of different races and cultures as "mixed marriages" whereas here in Ruth it's simply marriage.

Thread two – sex.

Sex and money are two things that generally don't get mentioned in sermons. But they are two enormously powerful drivers of human emotions and actions and are very dominant in our society and our songs, plays, books, TV soaps and political and social commentaries. I'm afraid we can't avoid the issue of sex in the story of Ruth. It is a thread that runs right through the whole story. Right from the beginning the original language euphemistically hints at sexual connotations. Naomi's two sons "take" two Moabite women as wives – and the implication is that they had sexual relations with them before the formal marriage. That makes Ruth's declaration of loyalty to Naomi even more outstanding. When Ruth goes out

gleaning in the fields to feed herself and Naomi, Boaz recognises her as a foreign woman working on her own in a field with men where there is danger of sexual harassment. When Naomi learns about where Ruth has been gleaning, and the actions of Boaz in making sure that his men do not “bother” her, she reinforces the message by pointing out that if Ruth gleans anywhere else she’s putting herself in danger. This would be more so because she is a Moabitess. Though Moab was an adjacent Canaanite territory to Israel and although Jews and Canaanites were both Semitic races, the Canaanite religious practice of Moab was based around a fertility rite. The Israelites commonly regarded Moab as being a byword for sexual immorality. As a Moabitess Ruth would have been seen by some of the men as “just asking for it”. Boaz’s intervention is critical at this stage. It doesn’t take much to see the parallels in our own culture, where in a male dominated society sexual harassment is all too frequently the experience of many women, and powerful men in positions of authority seek to use their economic dominance to treat women as objects to satisfy their own desires. But it is not all one-sided in the story of Ruth. When Naomi learns of the intervention of Boaz, she comes up with a plan which also involves the use of sexual encounter. You can argue that in the story she’s desperate – the barley and wheat harvests are over, there’s no more food to be gained from that source anymore. She is driven to disposing of the only asset that she’s got – the land formerly owned by her husband which is now in her possession. Religiously speaking this is a measure of the last resort. She wants to get Boaz to act as a kinsman-redeemer. So she has Ruth dress and perfume herself to become attractive to Boaz and gives her instructions about going into the post-harvest celebration when Boaz, probably dead drunk, is sleeping amongst the mounds of grain on the threshing floor with all his men. The wording of the story is full of euphemisms here, but essentially for Ruth to “lie at the feet” and “uncover his feet” are both a nice way of saying that she was sleeping with him. When Boaz wakes up suddenly, he finds Ruth lying alongside him. No doubt he begins to wonder what has happened. But when Ruth asked him to cover her with his cloak, he is effectively accepting the situation that he is or has been in a sexual relationship with her. But he does the decent thing – he gets her to leave before she’s discovered and shamed in front of the other men; she goes with food for herself and Naomi; and he hatches his plan to marry her. Boaz cunningly carries out his plan by getting the first kinsman redeemer who has the right to buy the land that Naomi is putting up for sale, to reject his right to do so because entering into a levirate marriage with Ruth would mean that it was her children that would inherit the land, not the redeemer’s children. It is these mercenary motives that allows Boaz to step in, buy the land, and marry Ruth. But the motives and behaviours here are pretty mixed. This is a very, very human tale.

Thread three – where is God?

It’s such a human tale that you might well ask where God is in all of this? Angela posed one answer to this question in what she said last week. Naomi sees her experience in Moab as punishment at the hand of God. When she returned to Bethlehem without husband, sons, and with a foreign daughter-in-law in tow the community there may have felt the same. Naomi certainly sees herself at this point in the story as being a victim. But that situation is turned round, initially by Ruth who takes the opportunity of harvest time to do something about their dire situation. When Naomi is unable, or unwilling, to do something, Ruth steps up to become her carer. As Ruth’s activities gain reward, so Naomi turns her life around. She sees an opportunity in the goodwill clearly offered by Boaz, and in the knowledge that under Mosaic Law he can fulfil the role of kinsman redeemer. She took a risk in going to Moab with her husband and sons. It didn’t work out. Ruth takes a risk going gleaning for food, but it does work out. Naomi puts Ruth at risk in implementing

her plan to make Boaz act as kinsman redeemer. She doesn't know whether Boaz will respond positively. The whole thing is shot through with uncertainty and risk. The view that every little thing that happens is part of God's great plan is called determinism. Those who view God's activities in this way often find themselves feeling victims when things clearly don't go well. If things don't go well, then someone is to blame. You find this attitude amongst some ultra conservative evangelical Christians in the United States. Their feeling that society is against them and does not conform to their values has led to extremism that is difficult to square with Christ teaching, and making alliances with political groupings whose Christian values are shallow or non-existent. Nor is this thinking of determinism unique to religious groups. Secular science has led to a rise in determinism that feels that once we are aware of all the timeless laws within which our existence functions then we will see that everything that is and will be can be predicted from what happened in the past. This modern view has been expressed by Prof Stephen Hawking who said that once he had solved the fundamental questions of physics that "we would truly know the mind of God". This view of determinism has had something of a dent as we find that uncertainty lies at the very heart of the continuing activity of creation. Indeed, without it the ability to grow, evolve, and develop would not exist in a world where we see it happening all the time.

The risk and uncertainty at the heart of the world has its upsides and its downsides. The meeting together of genetic material in plants and animals enables both to develop to meet new environmental pressures, but it also gives the possibility of developing hitherto unknown viruses to which we have no natural immunity. What we do as humans is involved in all of that. We take risks in the face of uncertainty and inadequate information and once we have moved forward, we can't go back and retake a decision. As the Persian proverb has it "Three things come not back – the sped arrow, the spoken word, time past". And so we need to go on and past decisions determine the scope of possibilities for the future. We genuinely have free will, and that can be in accordance with God's way or can be opposed to it. So in our modern world we have had the benefits that come from international trade and travel in terms of new goods, new experiences, and the interaction of different cultures many of which have been hugely beneficial. But we have also brought together ecological environments which had never met the past. That brought invasive species of plants and animals, that threaten our native environments, and allowed the transmission of disease and viruses between living things that had a natural immunity where they originated into environments where the living things have no immunity – as at present. We cannot avoid making decisions in the face of uncertainty and inadequate information – choices like this are being made every day – and we must acknowledge the risk in everything we do. But instead of blaming God or someone else when something goes wrong perhaps God is saying to us "well, that didn't go as planned did it! Now what are **you** going to do about it?" On his way back from the South Pole Capt. Robert Scott realised that he and his team were not going to make it. One of the last entries in his diary read "we took risks, we knew we took them, and things have come out against us. Therefore, we have no cause for complaint". Where is God in this story? Acting through Ruth, Naomi, Boaz. But to what end?

The punchline.

Stories like Ruth have a point to make. It isn't just a tale of disaster and redemption, with a happy ending. The punchline comes in the last chapter from verse 17 onwards. As a result of Ruth's loyalty to Naomi, and Boaz's integrity and love, their son, Obed, will have in his turn have a son, Jesse, and his son will be the greatest King that Israel ever had – David. Through the actions of the despised foreigner the whole of Israel will be glorified. Just to

make the point clear the writer picks up the comment of the women who, having been told that Boaz will marry the foreigner Ruth, call for a blessing on the marriage that will be similar to situations in the past where a foreigner was involved in the history of the people of Israel, citing Rachel and Leah and Tamar. The writer gives a genealogy starting with Pérez – the son of Tamar and Judah and leading through to David. From a Christian perspective this same genealogy extended will pick up Jesus as being in the same line as David in the gospel of Matthew.

This conclusion has a target. The story of Ruth, though set in the time of Judges, was actually written in the period immediately following the return from Exile of the Jews. Under the governor Nehemiah, and the priest Ezra, the returning exiles believed in determinism. They were certain that God had punished them in Exile for their previous sins, and they were absolutely intent on making sure that that did not happen in the future. So they went for religious ultra-orthodox purity. Instead of accepting the mixed marriages that had taken place between Samaritans and Jews who had remained behind they insisted that all foreign wives should be rejected. This story was told against that attitude which sees the community of faith as being composed only of the pure, instead of being a community of saints and sinners seeking God. That is a challenge which faces us today. Are we going to be a Church in which only the pure are accepted, and any perceived unorthodoxy or impurity results in expulsion, or are we to accept the mixed motives and human ambiguities which are part of being human and which are rehearsed in this story? Methodist local preachers are expected to read John Wesley's 44 sermons that define the particular emphases of Methodism. At a final interview the would-be preacher is usually asked to select one of the sermons and to say a little bit about it. A popular choice is Wesley's sermon "On the Catholic spirit". In it, Wesley uses a text from the Second book of Kings chapter 10 verse 15 when Jehu says to Jehoram "are you in accord with me as I am with you? If so, give me your hand". Developing this idea Wesley makes it clear that the forms and patterns of religion are less important to him than sharing a common faith and goal. It is an appeal to inclusiveness and against the Church of the pure alone. But I like another of his sermons "On enthusiasm". Wesley is against enthusiasm. It may seem amazing, at a time when a bit of enthusiasm would not come amiss, but the word has changed its meaning over time. Enthusiasm for Wesley meant fanaticism, that ultra-orthodox puritanism that believes it alone has all the truth. The story of Ruth is deep with meaning and was told against a religious fundamentalism of its time. Its lessons remain timeless.

Reflection

High King, Creator of all,
remind us that every human life is sacred,
whether it belongs to a woman in a war-torn land
or to a disabled person next door,
to an unborn infant or a terminally ill patient.
Remind us that, whatever a person's age, race or creed,
each individual has been made in your likeness,
and Christ has given his all for each one.
This makes every person precious in your sight.

Hymn StF 401 Come, sinners, to the gospel feast (Fulda)

Prayers of Intercession

While we are still far off from God our Father,
he comes to welcome us, and so we pray.

We remember all lapsed Christians,
all who have lost their faith;
that they may return to God
and find him ready
to welcome them home.

Silence

Father of love:
let your kingdom come.

We remember all
who have been made redundant,
or feel their jobs threatened by this crisis
all whose work is unhealthy,
or dangerous;
especially those key workers who continue to support the community.
that we may strive to uphold
each person's dignity
and ease each person's burden.

Silence

Father of love:
let your kingdom come.

We remember the rejected and the homeless,
those who have become bitter and twisted or hard and mean;
that the generous warmth of God's love
will work within them to thaw what is frozen,
strengthen what is weak,
heal what is hurt and repair what is damaged.

Silence

Father of love:
let your kingdom come.

We remember our homes,
And especially this day the work of Methodist Homes
that they may spread the Good News
of Christ's redeeming love
by the way they reflect his peace,
his understanding and his joy.

Silence

Father of love:
let your kingdom come.

We know that our merciful Father hears us;
let us pray in silence now for our individual needs.

Silence

Father, hear our prayers, through Jesus Christ our Lord,
Who taught us when we pray to say.....

Lord's Prayer

Hymn StF 663 I, the Lord of sea and sky (Here I am Lord)

Blessing

To the one whose goodness is without equal,
whose love is beyond comparison,
whose mercy is beyond understanding,
and whose power is beyond words,
be praise and glory,
worship and thanksgiving,
now and always.
Amen.