

Church at home

East Leake Methodist Church - 7 June 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.

God declares:

I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh.

Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

Hymn StF 6 Father, we love you
We worship and adore you:

Prayer of Adoration

Faithful God,
You fulfilled the promises of Easter and Pentecost
By sending your Holy Spirit
And opening the way of eternal life
To all the human race.
Keep us in the unity of your Spirit,
That every tongue may tell of your glory;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
Who is alive and reigns with you,
In the unity of the Holy Spirit,
One God, now and for ever. **Amen**

Prayer of Confession

Loving God
We have sinned against you
In what we have thought, said and done.
We have not loved you with our whole heart;
We have not loved our neighbours as ourselves.
We are truly sorry
And turn away from what is wrong.
Forgive us for the sake of your Son,
Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.
This is his gracious word
'Your sins are forgiven'
Amen. Thanks be to God.

Let us join together in the Lord's prayer. Our Father

Readings

Recently, the Methodist Church have designated the month of June as Bible Month – a month to focus on a particular book of the Bible. This year the chosen book is the book of Ruth. I will start looking at the book this week. Roger is writing the service for next week and he will finish the book.

So our first challenge is to find the Book of Ruth in the Old Testament! In the NIV version of the Bible that we use in church the book is only 4 pages long. It comes just after the book of Judges.

The story of Ruth and Naomi is the story of two women caught in a crisis over which they have no control.

Ruth chapters 1 and 2

Luke 10. 25-37

Address

The story of Ruth and Naomi is the story of two women caught in a crisis over which they had no control. It is providential that the Methodist Church has asked us to read this book of the bible at this time. What lessons are there for us in their story?

This story is set in the very early days of Israel – even before Israel had kings. It begins “In the days when the judges ruled”. There was no central authority. Instead, from time to time a temporary ruler took power, usually in a time of national emergency.

Elimelech, his wife and two sons lived in Bethlehem. But there was a famine, so they went to Moab (present day Jordan) where conditions were better and settled there. So from the very start of the story it is made clear that this is a time and place where there was no government support in a time of crisis. People just had to manage as best they could.

But then all the men in the family died. The household went down from six people to just three. Worse, this was a society where the labour of the men was critical in providing for the household. Naomi was left a widow with her two daughters in law, Orpah and Ruth. This is a book about women fending for themselves and making their own way in life.

There was a support system in place – the family. Family bonds were strong and family obligations were regarded as very important. So Naomi took the decision to appeal for support to her dead husband’s family. She decided to travel back to Bethlehem.

In our society we are thankful that people left alone can call on state for financial support such as pensions and benefits. There is much that could be improved in our systems, but how much better they are than no financial support at all. But still in a time of crisis we look to our family for emotional support. It is one of the hardships of the present emergency that we cannot be with our families in the way that we would normally do.

Naomi told her two daughters in law to do as she was doing – to return to their own families. Naomi was being selfless: she would be left alone when they went. She

insisted because to go back to their own families was the best way for the two younger women to survive.

The three women must have had a good relationship together because they both refused to leave her. I guess that they had been through a very traumatic time together, witnessing the three deaths of their husbands.

Naomi now becomes very practical. In a society where a woman's best hope of financial security was to marry, she pointed out how she could not provide them with another husband. Orpah saw the sense of this and tearfully said goodbye. But Ruth insisted in remaining with Naomi. She vows "Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God".

Ruth was taking a real risk in saying this. She would be a stranger, an immigrant, in Bethlehem. Would the people there accept her? Naomi had been selfless in telling Ruth to return to her home. Now Ruth is being selfless in staying with Naomi. They each wanted to take care of the other.

Naomi blamed God for her misfortunes. In verse 13 we read her saying to Orpah and Ruth, "It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has gone out against me."

That is a very understandable reaction. Naomi had lost her original home through famine: she had lost her husband and sons: she now faced a difficult journey back to Bethlehem, not knowing how things would go for her there.

As Christians, what shall we say about Naomi's comment? God loves us and wants to hear from us. Sometimes when we pray we want to express disappointment, anger, blame, doubt. God is a safe place where we can say these things. Telling God how we feel helps us to come to terms with the situation.

Things had gone very badly for Naomi, it was natural to look for a cause, for someone to blame. Is it God's fault when something goes wrong?

It's important here to say that Jesus has expressly told us that when we see a person in difficulties, it doesn't mean that that person is a bad person. In John 9.1-3 Jesus was asked why a man was born blind. Was it due to his sins or to his parents' sins? "It was not" said Jesus. "This happened so that the power of God could be seen in him".

We live in the world that God created, and the world that he created involves risk. Bad things happen, good things happen; we have to manage our lives to deal with both. At present we are watching our government to see what decisions they make. Should the children go back to school? Yes, because they need their education, they need the company of their friends but no, because of the risk to the health of themselves, their families and their teachers. There are no risk free answers.

Where is God in this? God has made us capable people. He has given us freewill, and the ability to make decisions. He has made us able to cope, and on the whole, we do cope with what life brings.

So here in this bible story we do not see God intervening from outside Naomi's world to put everything alright for her in an instant. No, we see Him working through the people she knows to get her to a better place.

The first person to help Naomi is Ruth. What a comfort it must have been to have someone with whom she could share her woes and who knew exactly what she was going through. What a comfort it must have been to have company on that long journey back to Bethlehem.

The relationship between Ruth and Naomi was strong and included a number of elements. One element was faith "Your people will be my people and your God my God".

Moving on in the story we now reach point at the end of chapter one where the two women arrive back in Bethlehem. Again, Naomi presents herself as a victim "Don't call me Naomi (meaning pleasant) call me Mara (meaning bitter) because the Almighty has made my life very bitter". The women of Bethlehem recognised her and sympathised.

Later on in the story (verse 4.3) we learn that Naomi had inherited some land from Elimelech so presumably the two women went and lived there. But they had nothing to eat. So Ruth volunteered to go out into the fields to glean for them both. Presumably Naomi was not fit enough to join her. Gleaning meant picking up from the ground the bits of barley from the harvest that the men harvesting the crop missed. It was back breaking work.

Ruth could do this because God had commanded Moses to tell the people of Israel not to harvest the grain along the edges of the field or to go back and pick up what the harvesters drop. "Leave them for the poor and the foreigners living among you. I am the Lord your God". Leviticus 19.9-10

Now the second person to help makes his entrance in the story – Boaz. He is "a man of standing", a substantial landowner, who owns the harvest. He is impressed by what he has heard and by what he sees of Ruth. He says in verse 12 "May the Lord repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge".

He helps her by:

- Letting her continue to glean in his fields – verse 9
- Telling his men not to touch her – verse 10 – sexual harassment of unprotected girls was a danger then. Naomi is aware of it – verse 22
- Allowing her to drink water provided for his men – verse 11
- Giving her some bread and roasted grain to sustain her in the work – verse 14
- Telling his men to leave out extra grain for her to pick up – verse 14.

In this way Ruth was able to provide food for herself and for her mother in law.

So we leave Naomi and Ruth supporting one another and managing to eat through Ruth's hard work helped by the generosity of Boaz. Roger will finish the story next week as he takes us through the remaining two chapters of the book.

The society of that time was very different from our own. We see Naomi and Ruth managing to survive in a traditional society where men owned most of the assets. God helped them. Not in a dramatic way but by giving them each other; by giving them steadfastness and courage in dark times; and by the kindness of a stranger, Boaz.

Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan, the man who helped a foreign stranger. One of the good things to come from this crisis is the many stories of strangers helping other people.

Over 3,000 years separate us from Ruth and Naomi. The culture in which they lived was very different from our own. Yet human emotions haven't changed. We recognise the feelings and motives portrayed in the story. Nor has God's love changed for the people that he has made.

A Reflective Prayer:

Lord, we thank you that you have looked after your people in every age and place. We thank you that you listen to our troubles and give us courage to face them and to get through them.

We draw strength from the story of Naomi and Ruth as we see you working your purposes out to care for them through the kindness of a stranger.

We have been helped by kind strangers in the past two months and we have tried to be kind to others where it has been possible. Help us to continue to try and build a better society so that this world may become more like your perfect world of harmony and peace.

We ask this prayer in the Name of Jesus, the Saviour of the whole world. **Amen**

**Hymn StF 370 Breathe on me, Breath of God;
Fill me with life anew**

Prayers of Intercession

There is a response to this prayer

Lord of all, the Word made flesh

Response Bring hope to your world today

God our Father
Grant us the help of your Spirit
In our prayers for the salvation of all people

First we remember all the countries of our world and the many disputes and wars that trouble them.

We particularly remember the turmoil in the USA caused by the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis last week.

May the leaders of the nations seek justice, freedom and peace for all.

**Lord of all, the Word made flesh
Bring hope to your world today.**

Next we pray for our country
For recovery from the coronavirus
And for your guidance on those who have to make decisions for us.
Give them compassion for all, wisdom and skill

**Lord of all, the Word made flesh
Bring hope to your world today.**

We pray for the Church throughout the World.
We pray for this church and for our ministers and pastors,
And we remember the work of the Torch Trust spreading your gospel among the
visually impaired as they celebrate their 60th anniversary today

- We pray for guidance and wisdom for their Trustees as they continue to discern the future ministry of Torch
- We pray for the Executive team (Michael Heaney and Paul Wood), that they will be strengthened and renewed each day and know God's presence
- We pray for their clients who may feel isolated, lonely and anxious, that God will provide them with the necessary support, comfort and peace

**Lord of all, the Word made flesh
Bring hope to your world today.**

We pray for our friends and neighbours.
We pray for all those who are dear to us.
In the silence, let us pray for those we know who are in distress of mind or body.
Let them know that you are there and that you bring healing and strength

**Lord of all, the Word made flesh
Bring hope to your world today.**

We offer all these prayers in the mighty name of Our Lord Jesus Christ **Amen**

**Hymn: StF 132 O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come**

Closing Prayer

God of Power,
may the boldness of your Spirit transform us,
may the gentleness of your Spirit lead us,
and may the gifts of your Spirit equip us
to serve and worship you
now and always

Amen

May God bless us
In our sleep with rest, in our dreams with vision,
In our waking with a calm mind,
In our soul with the friendship of the Holy Spirit
Today and every day

Amen

This service was prepared by Angela Latham for East Leake Methodist Church