

## Sunday 6th February 2022 4th Sunday before Lent

### Collect

Lord of the hosts of heaven, our salvation and our strength, without you we are lost: guard us from all that harms or hurts and raise us when we fall; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

### First Reading: Ruth 2. 1-8, 14-18

Now Naomi had a kinsman on her husband's side, a prominent rich man, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. <sup>2</sup> And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, 'Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain, behind someone in whose sight I may find favour.' She said to her, 'Go, my daughter.'<sup>3</sup> So she went. She came and gleaned in the field behind the reapers. As it happened, she came to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the

family of Elimelech. <sup>4</sup> Just then Boaz came from Bethlehem. He said to the reapers, 'The LORD be with you.' They answered, 'The LORD bless you.'<sup>5</sup> Then Boaz said to his servant who was in charge of the reapers, 'To whom does this young woman belong?' <sup>6</sup> The servant who was in charge of the reapers answered, 'She is the Moabite who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab.'<sup>7</sup> She said, "Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the reapers." So she came, and she has been on her feet from early this morning until now, without resting even for a moment.'

<sup>8</sup> Then Boaz said to Ruth, 'Now listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women. <sup>9</sup> Keep

your eyes on the field that is being reaped, and follow behind them. I have ordered the young men not to bother you. If you get thirsty, go to the vessels and drink from what the young men have drawn.'

<sup>14</sup> At mealtime Boaz said to her, 'Come here, and eat some of this bread, and dip your morsel in the sour wine.' So she sat beside the reapers, and he heaped up for her some parched grain. She ate until she was satisfied, and she had some left over. <sup>15</sup> When she got up to glean, Boaz instructed his young men, 'Let her glean even among the standing sheaves, and do not reproach her. <sup>16</sup> You must also pull out some handfuls for her from the bundles, and leave them for her to glean, and do not rebuke her.'

<sup>17</sup> So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley. <sup>18</sup> She picked it up and came into the town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gleaned. Then she took out and gave her what was left over after she herself had been satisfied.

**Gospel Reading:**

**Matthew 25:31-end**

**31** 'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. **32** All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, **33** and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. **34** Then the king will say to those at his right

hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; **35** for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, **36** I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." **37** Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? **38** And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? **39** And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" **40** And the king

will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." **41** Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; **42** for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, **43** I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." **44** Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" **45** Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to

one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” 46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’

**Post Communion Prayer**

Go before us, Lord, in all we do with your most gracious favour, and guide us with your continual help, that in all our works

begun, continued and ended in you, we may glorify your holy name, and finally by your mercy receive everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

## **Sermon – Ruth 2. 1- 9, 14-18; Matthew 25.31-46 - Richard Ford**

There was famine in the land, so she and her husband and her two sons left their home, crossed the river and settled in a land where food was plentiful. After a time, her sons settled down with two of the local girls and all was going well. But then tragedy struck: first her husband died and then her two sons, leaving the three women without a breadwinner, without male protection.

So she decided to return to her own country, where the famine had come to an end. One of her daughters-in-law decided to remain in her homeland, but the other insisted on remaining with her mother-in-law as she returned to her home town of Bethlehem.

And that's the situation at the beginning of our first reading this morning. Naomi is the mother-in-law, Ruth her daughter-in-law.

And they are effectively destitute – two defenceless women with no source of income. So Ruth decides that her only option is to glean in one of the nearby fields. Such a decision was not without risk, as is implied in Boaz' assurance to Ruth that he has told his men not to touch her – perhaps the first anti-harassment policy in history!

And I think it's not unreasonable to suggest that in this account we can see operating the first, what we call today, food bank.

Gleaning, leaving what the harvesters missed so that the poor could pick it up was enshrined in the law of Moses, so we find in the book of Leviticus, God instructing the people, through Moses, that when they reap the harvest of their land, "not to reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest.... Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the Lord your God." (Leviticus 19. 9)

Here and throughout the Old Testament, we see that God has a heart for the poor and for the alien, that is the foreigner, the refugee, so much so that he has the meeting of their needs included in the law. But Boaz goes further than this minimum requirement. He instructs his men to allow Ruth to glean among the sheaves, not just at the edge of the field, and even to "pull out some stalks for her from the bundles and leave them for her to pick up."

And we see a similar concern for the poor and the needy in our Gospel reading. Here the criterion for God's judgement is how people have responded to the hungry, the thirsty, the migrant, the destitute, the sick and those in prison – all

those in many cases on the fringes of society and from whom many will turn away in disgust, or say that they have brought this misfortune on themselves, or they're scroungers, or it's nothing to do with me – the "I'm all right, Jack" mentality.

Tom Wright, the former Bishop of Durham, in his commentary on these verses suggests that as Jesus refers to those in desperate straits as "brothers of mine" that they are his followers, now known as Christians, and that the righteous are those who have yet to embrace the Christian faith, but who show compassion to those in need, and it is on this that they will be judged. Christians don't have a monopoly on good deeds.

Be that as it may, the central point is the need for compassion for our fellow human beings, for as Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me."

I mentioned at the beginning of this service that we're embarking on a series of sermons linked to our parishes' vision statement and this morning we're looking at how we relate to our local community, in this case through the Bromley Food Bank. For some of us, our experience of food banks may be the collecting box outside St Francis or the vicarage, or a collecting point at one of the supermarkets, or pictures we've see on television of a church hall, with tables laden with food items and a queue of people collecting their allocation. However, this is more like the tip of the ice-berg. There's a lot more going on below the surface.

For a start, you can't just rock up at the Bromley Food Bank and ask for food. You have to have been allocated a voucher by one of around 200 organisations, including schools, doctors' surgeries, Citizens Advice Bureaux and the Job Centre - although they don't actually issue vouchers; they give the contact details to one of the food bank volunteers – the majority of people who work for the food bank are unpaid – who then contacts the client to issue the voucher.

It's perhaps not so well known that food banks don't just provide food. They also offer things like toilet rolls, toiletries and sanitary items. And in these days of fuel poverty, the food bank works with CAB to issue fuel vouchers – a service which is going to become even more vital in the months ahead, when the price cap is raised in April.

And if someone should turn up without a voucher, they are referred to the Citizens' Advice Bureau, who will have a representative available to deal with such occurrences.

So, then, we have the people who man the food banks at the URC Church in Bromley, the two outlets in Orpington and the recently opened centre at the Salvation Army premises in Penge. At least one of these is open every day of the week. Then behind these we have the warehouse, with its manager and the volunteers who sort the food donations as they come in.

During the most severe Covid restrictions, the distribution centres were closed and the interaction with clients moved online and by phone, with food being delivered by a team of volunteer drivers. Amanda Stone, the food bank manager, tells us that they are greatly relieved that clients are now able to collect the food.

So how is that people, in ever increasing numbers, are ending up using food banks – the Trussell Trust Food Banks, the organisation behind the Bromley Food Bank, but only one of many such organisations, in 2014/15 provided just over million emergency food parcels, a number which by 2019/20 had almost doubled to just under 2 million?

There are a various answers to this question, including losing your job. Last week there was an appeal for help from a bricklayer who had fallen and broken his elbow and was no longer able to carry out his trade. A few months earlier, a man who had had a good job in finance had been laid off because of Covid and was struggling to pay his mortgage and his energy bills.

Long term sickness, often as a result of mental ill-health; domestic abuse, leading to a woman's sudden departure for a safe house, unable to take anything with her; waiting for universal credit to arrive and being sanctioned for failing to attend a DWP appointment are also reasons for turning to a food bank. And then there are those who have no recourse to public funds because they are asylum seekers awaiting processing. A recent client was struggling because, although he was on universal credit, his partner was ineligible because of her country of origin.

One thing is abundantly clear: just how much the food banks are valued by those who benefit from them. This was what a client helped in February 2021 had to say:

"I lost my job in September and have now got to the point where I'm on my last legs so I rang Bromley Foodbank. Within a couple of days, I had three big bags of food delivered by a lovely, smiley man which included porridge, tins of soup/vegetables/fruit/rice pudding, a box of tea, some toothpaste etc. and there was even a little box of Celebrations and a packet of chocolate digestives - my fave! I was so happy - it felt like Christmas! The people I spoke to on the

phone, and via e-mail were so very kind and helpful and it was so easy to arrange so thank you again, very much."

And this from one helped a month later:

My 18-year-old son lives in a semi-independent accommodation as he is on the autistic spectrum with ADHD. He is in receipt of universal credit and this isn't a lot to live on and tough to budget for. It was a week before my son's next payment and he had run out of funds and food 4 days prior, I too, was struggling. I reached out to the food bank, with anticipation, and embarrassment that I could not help my son. I will never forget the response from Holly; friendly, helpful, non-judgemental, she was lovely and all my worries changed to relief, she quickly arranged a call to my son. The lady he spoke to could not have been better at speaking to Joe and he too was happy. Later that day the most wonderful food package was delivered, Joe sent me a photo and was over the moon and I was genuinely touched by the thoughtfulness, toilet roll, toothpaste, some Nutella and some treats as well as lots of things to make meals, the things that make you feel human not someone who is begging for food, I felt that this was recognised. I think the biggest thing I can say is the dignity that we experienced meant a lot.

And that thanks extends to a number of people from our two churches who have supported the Bromley Food Bank in a number of ways. Ken Bryan regularly gathers the food from our collection points and takes it to the food bank warehouse in north Bromley. Tim Shingler, together with the Men's Group, and aided by some of the fairer sex, has organised a number of food collections in the town centre – the generosity shown by some people has been quite humbling. Kim Teare and Kate Dyer have coordinated the distribution of Christmas hampers, together with a team of volunteer drivers. Anne Herbert is another volunteer and one of our reps, as is Pam Sear. And my wife, Anne, works online and on the phone several days a week and has provided me with material for this sermon.

Thomas Jefferson, the former American president, is quoted as saying, "The measure of a society is how it treats its weakest members" and others have made similar comments: Nelson Mandela, "A nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens, but its lowest ones." And Mahatma Ghandi, in 1931, "A nation's greatness is measured by how it treats its weakest members."

As I may have mentioned before, in 1988 the Lambeth Conference drew up what have come to be known as the Five Marks of Mission for the church, the fourth of which is that we members of the church “should seek to transform unjust structures in society.”

In the light of what we have read today in “Ruth” and what Jesus has to say in his analogy of the sheep and the goats, it seems to me that supporting our local food bank is one way of transforming injustice in our society, but that the greatest way of doing that would be to eliminate the need for food banks completely. Amen

**Prayer Pointers:** Pray for those caught up in the ever-rising tensions between Russia and Ukraine. Pray for peace and harmony in this volatile situation.

Pray for the people of Afghanistan: the families struggling to cope and find money for food, the girls no longer being educated, the women no longer able to work freely.

Pray for all in this country, for all in our local communities as we attempt to return to some normality after the Covid restrictions. Pray for the lonely, those still anxious about mixing with others.

Pray for the jobless and all struggling to make ends meet who are going to be affected by rising costs especially the costs of energy to heat and light their homes. For all who organise and use local food banks especially for Bromley foodbank as they seek to appoint new managers and trustees. Give thanks for the volunteers at Shrublands foodbank as they serve those on the estate.

Pray for all who are in leadership. In parliament, in our local councils and communities. Pray for the weary, those feeling out of their depth and those who are sinking beneath the heavy load of responsibility. Pray that leaders may show justice, fairness and courtesy in their dealings with others.

Pray for her Majesty the Queen, who marks seventy years of her accession to the throne. Give thanks that she remains steadfast in her faith. Pray that she may be blessed with strength and good health in the future.

Pray for all in the NHS struggling to cope with complex cases as a result of the backlog caused by the Covid pandemic. Pray for all who have to give bad news to patients in the coming week and pray especially for MacMillan Nurses who support those undergoing treatment and recovering from cancer in our local hospitals.