

TRINITY SUNDAY – 7th June 2020
BIBLE MONTH WEEK 1

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Opening affirmation

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty," who was, and is, and is to come.'
'You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power,
for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.'

Hymn – Songs of Fellowship 183

1

Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty!
Early in the morning our song shall rise to
thee:
holy, holy, holy, merciful and mighty,
God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!

2

Holy, holy, holy! All the saints adore thee,
casting down their golden crowns around the
glassy sea;
cherubim and seraphim falling down before
thee,
who wert, and art, and evermore shalt be.

3

Holy, holy, holy! Though the darkness hide thee,
though the eye of sinful man thy glory may not
see,
only thou art holy; there is none beside thee,
perfect in power, in love, and purity.

4

Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty!
All thy works shall praise thy name in earth and
sky and sea;
holy, holy, holy, merciful and mighty,
God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!

Reginald Heber (1783-1826)

Opening Prayer

Let us praise and worship the Father, God of love,
who created us in his image, and daily satisfies us with good things.

Let us praise and worship the Son, Jesus Christ our Saviour,
who lived among us, suffered and died, yet rose again to bring us new life.

Let us praise and worship the Holy Spirit, giver of life,
who teaches, inspires, guides and comforts us,
transforming us day by day into God's likeness.

Let us praise and worship the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit
now and for all eternity, three-in-one, blessed Trinity. Amen. ¹

Read Ruth chapter 1

Reflection 1 - Lament

Chapter one describes the life-changing crisis in the ordinary lives of one family, Naomi and her husband Elimelek and their two, probably adult or older teenage sons Mahlon and Kilion. They come from Bethlehem. Elimelek's name means God is King and already that should tell us something else about what is going on. Here is a man who comes from the place where the King who is God will one day be born.

This is a settled, ordinary family with hopes of a pleasant, lovely life - Naomi means pleasant or lovely or delightful. The family is however vulnerable; life is already a struggle. When famine strikes things get worse. Imagine the pain and agony of Elimelek and Naomi as they think through the best thing to do to protect their family. Is it to stay put and hope for the best or to take the risk of leaving home to become refugees in a foreign country among the nation's enemy in Moab to the east? Moab is an ungodly land of foreign customs and culture. This is a dilemma faced by millions of displaced people, refugees and asylum seekers today. The example we have here would be like a resident of South Korea fleeing to North Korea for sanctuary or a devout Shia Muslim heading to Saudi Arabia for safety.

The upheavals of the move to Moab, the arduous journey on top of their physical health already compromised by malnutrition, can hardly be imagined but it is happening somewhere in the world today. Hopes of working hard to build a new life in Moab are then suddenly dashed with Elimelek's death. Painful though that must have been, Naomi still had her sons to think off, the expectation of their care and protection as she grew older and with the prospect of grandchildren to hold and the family line secure. After 10 years with both sons now married to Moabite women their intention to settle is clear. Things appear to be on the up, that is until a double tragedy strikes. Hopes and dreams are again snatched away with the death of both Mahlon and Kilion. It is at this point that the story really begins but I don't want to let this merely be the set up for what follows. I want us to try to enter into some of the emotion of this moment. Try to see and feel these three grieving women without family and their hopes destroyed.

In that community and at that time they would be among the most vulnerable, those for whom, along with orphaned children, God has, and continues to have, the most concern. A little later we hear Naomi's heart verses 20 to 21, when on her return to Bethlehem she, the one named pleasant or delightful, says this, 'Don't call me Naomi,' she told them. 'Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.'

It is a heart-wrenching lament rung out of this broken and desperate woman who has borne too much suffering. Although these words are declared to the female friends she left behind, they are expressed to God and before God. All our emotions, especially our deepest ones, must be expressed before God. It is OK to rail, shout and to blame God, although he did not inflict this or any suffering directly on Naomi or on any other sufferer. Naomi is standing with the Psalmist, crying out to God in pain. In our Home Group we have been reading some psalms of lament. This is a time for lament in our land, in our world. It is the time to weep and mourn for what this disease has stolen from us - for what has been lost, lost lives, lost futures, lost hopes and dreams, lost relationships, lost jobs, lost income, lost education and lost contact. This is not morbid or negative, it is necessary and genuine. Naomi told it like it was, so must we. God can take it and above all he is not indifferent to any human suffering, rather he has entered into human suffering in Jesus to rescue, to redeem, to give us a hope and a future. So let's pause and slowly, reflectively speak out these prayers of lament asking for God's help.

Prayer

Creator God, how I sometimes despair at the state of this broken world, so tarnished by sin and its effects. Every time I watch the news or read a newspaper I see more violence, bloodshed, suffering and pain. **Lord I cry out to you.**

So many lack or have lost so much in life, even the basics are denied to them. There is so much unfairness, injustice, abuse and greed. **Lord I cry out to you.**

Even nature is groaning in the agonies of climate change and global heating, bringing flood, drought, fire and violent storms affecting the lives and livelihoods of so many especially those who already have so little. **Lord I cry out to you.**

And now coronavirus invades the earth bringing death and bereavement to hundreds of thousands, seriously disrupting the lives of many millions bringing fear, isolation, unemployment, financial stress and mental anguish. **Lord I cry out to you.**

Why Lord, why? In your mercy heal what is broken and hasten the day when your Kingdom will come and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. **Lord I cry out to you.** Amen.

Lord, we know that you are faithful over all things, even the hard, dark times of my life. Help us not to back away from you in my time of grief. Help us instead to lean into you and trust you, even when we do not understand your ways. Please keep our heads above the waters of anguish and our feet from slipping off the ground of truth. Help us see you in these hard moments and glorify you in response. In Jesus' Name. Amen. ²

God the Father, have mercy upon us.

God the Son, have mercy upon us.

God the Holy Spirit, have mercy upon us.

Holy, blessed and glorious Trinity, have mercy upon us. Amen. ³

Hymn

God I look to You, I won't be overwhelmed.

Give me vision to see things like You do.

God I look to You, You're where my help comes from.

Give me wisdom, You know just what to do.

I will love You Lord my strength, I will love you Lord my shield,

I will love You Lord my rock,

Forever all my days, I will love You God.

Hallelujah our God reigns, Hallelujah our God reigns,

Hallelujah our God reigns, Forever all my days, Hallelujah! ⁴

Reflection 2 - Loyalty

Even after her terrible losses Naomi has not lost sight of God although he may seem distant. Somehow news reaches her of the end of the famine in Bethlehem. God has come to the aid of his people, she declares, and so Naomi decides to return to her home, to Bethlehem the birthplace of kings. It is for the best. It is best for her widowed daughters-in-law if she is not a burden to them and they remain to be married again; they are still young. We now witness another deeply personal moment in this epic account. Clearly, a profound bond of attachment, forged in the heat of adversity, links Naomi with Orpah and Ruth. It is desperately hard for them to part from one another so they travel some way together on the journey towards Bethlehem. Perhaps Naomi wishes to try to ease the pain of parting, knowing they are very unlikely to meet again.

She knows what it is to be a foreigner and so perhaps wants to spare them from becoming foreigners in her country as she had in theirs. Perhaps Naomi permits them to travel to the border in the hope that the reality of the journey will make them realise the wisdom of remaining in Moab, which Naomi has been encouraging them to realise for some time. We simply don't know.

This scene is so directly and beautiful described by this consummate storyteller. It is perfect for a tense dramatic scene in a blockbuster film or TV mini-series. We hear Naomi's tearful pleading to Orpah and Ruth to turn back, a phrase repeated three times in this section. We see all three clinging to each other in conflicted indecision. We see Orpah turning back and her tearful goodbye and hear Ruth's eloquent affirmation of devotion. There is no blame for Orpah. Her actions are not to be contrasted with Ruth's. There is no right or wrong here even though the story moves on with Ruth and Naomi and Orpah is lost to us.

Ruth's declaration of unconditional life-long love is remarkable. Her unreserved loyalty reaches to the very heights of human devotion. It is a covenantal commitment and of course, it reflects something of God's unconditional love for us, his steadfast, eternal loving-kindness.

Ruth's love for Naomi is all encompassing. She commits to sacrifice herself for Naomi, to live with her, to become one with her culturally and religiously and to remain with her for the whole of Naomi's life and beyond, such that they will be buried together – something that was particularly significant in that society.

Ruth's turning away from her own local gods and way of worship to God speaks volumes for the faith of Naomi and of Ruth's late husband and their witness to the true and living God. She now becomes a convert.

So together these two women move on to the next part of the story, to face together the life of poverty and vulnerability which was the regular lot of widows then and so often is now. Food is critical in this story and the chapter ends with a note that it is the time of the barley harvest. That provides us with a trailer for next week. In the meantime reflect on human love and devotion, human solidarity and resilience. Reflect on the power of female friendship, courage and determination to survive. Think about God's unconditional, everlasting, endless devotion to us - commitment which took Jesus to a cross for love's sake, for you and me. That is the great redemption story within which the story of Ruth sits.

Personal Prayers followed by the Lord's Prayer

Hymn – Songs of Fellowship 42

Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart,
Be all else but naught to me, save that Thou art;
Be Thou my best thought in the day and the night,
Both waking and sleeping, Thy presence my light.

Be Thou my wisdom, be Thou my true word,
Be Thou ever with me, and I with Thee, Lord;
Be Thou my great Father, and I Thy true son;
Be Thou in me dwelling, and I with Thee one.

Be Thou my breastplate, my sword for the fight;
Be Thou my whole armour, be Thou my true might;
Be Thou my soul's shelter, be Thou my strong tower:
O raise Thou me heavenward, great Power of my power.

High King of heaven, Thou heaven's bright Sun,
O grant me its joys after victory is won;
Great Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
Still be Thou my vision, O Ruler of all.

Irish 8th Century translated by Mary Elizabeth Byrne (1880-1931)

Blessing

Now may the blessing, peace and comfort of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit be with you and with all those you love, now and always. Amen.

Acknowledgements

- ¹ From rootsontheweb.com prayers for Trinity Sunday.
- ² An abridged version of Pouring Out Your Heart in Lament to God by Debbie Przybylski from www.crosswalk.com
- ³ From Common Worship Daily Prayer published by Church House Publishing © 2005 The Archbishops' Council
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