

BIBLE MONTH WEEK 3 – 21st June 2020

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Opening affirmation

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for we are all one in Christ Jesus.

So let us worship the One God as the one people of God.

Hymn – Songs of Fellowship 2249 ¹

Come, people of the risen King,
Who delight to bring Him praise.
Come, all and tune your hearts to sing
To the morning star of grace.
From the shifting shadows of the earth
We will lift our eyes to Him,
Where steady arms of mercy reach
To gather children in.

*Rejoice! Rejoice! Let every tongue rejoice!
One heart, one voice, O church of Christ, rejoice!*

Come, those whose joy is morning sun,
And those weeping through the night.
Come, those who tell of battles won,
And those struggling in the fight.
For His perfect love will never change
And His mercies never cease,
But follow us through all our days
With the certain hope of peace.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Let every tongue rejoice

Come, young and old from every land,
Men and women of the faith.
Come, those with full or empty hands,
Find the riches of His grace.
Over all the world His people sing –
Shore to shore we hear them call
The truth that cries through every age:
'Our God is all in all!'

Rejoice! Rejoice! Let every tongue rejoice

Opening Prayer

Loving and eternal God we hear your call to come whoever we are and however we feel.
Give to us the determination and courage to lift our eyes off our circumstances and up to you in
praise and adoration.

Almighty God, above and beyond, near and within, **we worship and adore you.**
Almighty God, holy and perfect, gracious and forgiving, **we worship and adore you.**
Almighty God, strong and powerful, compassionate and gentle, **we worship and adore you.**

May we find in worship you are with us. Be our focus, our centre, our all in all, our source of life, freedom and love, for to you and you alone belong praise, adoration, worship and thanksgiving now and for ever. **Amen**

Introduction to Reading

We turn to chapter three of the Book of Ruth in which, if you recall, we are seeking to find within the story something of our stories, today's stories and all set within the context of God's story. In chapter two Rosie helped us to explore the significance of Ruth's actions, as she lived out in hard practical reality her words of promise to Naomi in chapter one. As may be said in the language of today, she talked the talk in chapter 1 and in chapter 2 we saw her walking the walk. She has laboured long and hard in the hot sun to glean fallen grain spilled by the reapers to make bread to eat, barley bread, the bread of the poor, that which a boy once offered to Jesus and from which, along with a few fish, he fed five thousand men plus women and children too. Clearly Ruth has been noticed, respected and favoured by Boaz in whose fields she has been gleaning. He treats her not merely in the way required by the Law of Moses but with abundant grace, unmerited favour, by sharing food with her and instructing his workers to leave extra grain for her to glean.

Read Ruth chapter 3

Reflection

Ruth and Naomi's circumstances have so many parallels with people's lives today. We thought about the pain of bereavement and the power of lament in week one. In week two Rosie reflected a little on the reality of poverty. Both are issues still so relevant today and will be in the months ahead as the personal and financial effects of Covid-19 become more widespread. We also see represented in Naomi and Ruth topical concerns around the treatment and status of women in our society and, perhaps most topically of all at the moment, discrimination on the grounds of race. Like the Book of Jonah, the Book of Ruth promotes Godly attitudes towards the foreigner and affirms that God does not discriminate against anyone on the grounds of race so neither must we. Ruth, the foreigner from Moab, will be the great grandmother of King David in the line of Jesus, born in Bethlehem, where the action of this story takes place.

The established law given through Moses and present in the time of Ruth included provision for the widow, the orphan, the poor and the foreigner living within the community. As we have noted already Boaz demonstrates not only how to abide by the law but how to show grace-filled loving-kindness above and beyond the legal requirement. That included blessing Ruth with material blessing of food to alleviate her poverty; with the blessing of welcome to overcome her foreignness, thereby opposing racist stereotyping and discrimination and bridging cultural, religious and language barriers, and with spiritual blessing through his words 'The Lord bless you, my daughter' in 3:10.

So now in what is perhaps the most problematic part of the story, we see Boaz behaving with respect and propriety towards Ruth in a potentially compromising and sexually tempting night time encounter. This cultural practice described in chapter 3 is certainly strange to us, not to be recommended to your daughters or grand-daughters and in the age of the Me Too movement feels deeply uncomfortable. All we can say is that here it works out well and that was for a number of reasons.

Firstly, there was a customary expectation in that society of what these actions meant even though they were open to abuse then and so, sinful human nature being what it is, will have been abused. The actions of Ruth are symbolic and follow a well-understood pattern. Notice Ruth lays down at Boaz's feet not his side; she uncovers his feet not his body and she asks to be covered by his cloak. Symbolic use of clothes was quite familiar then, such as the tearing of a garment as a sign of deep distress or grief for example.

Secondly Ruth trusts Naomi's instructions about her own culture even though Ruth takes great risks with her honour, reputation and modesty. Thirdly both Naomi and Ruth trust Boaz's integrity and honourability, and he had given good evidence of this in his attitude to his workers and his generosity toward Ruth both in word and deed.

Even though this event takes place in the depths of night time at the completion of the harvest with its accompanying festivities, so that we may assume Boaz is not entirely sober, he behaves with deep respect and sensitivity towards Ruth. This night time exchange is beautifully described. It is both touching and romantic, I think. Although I speak as one known to be rather a sucker for that kind of thing! Boaz shares his feelings too as he alludes to his surprise that Ruth is seeking more than his protection so she can glean in his fields. She is effectively proposing marriage and he is humbly gratified that she should consider an older man like him in preference to the other more eligible younger men.

Yet our story is not done for we now discover there is an obstacle to Ruth and Boaz's happiness in the form of a nearer kinsman with a claim and we must wait to see the outcome of that until next week. In the meantime Boaz ensures Ruth's reputation by insisting she leave before first light and then blesses her and Naomi with a substantial gift of barley, presumably already threshed and ready to use. He fills her cloak with barley as an initial commitment to fill her life with love. Or as one commentator notes, through Boaz's gift Ruth is able to fill Naomi's arms with food as one day she will fill them with a child.

Here then is a shining example of how to act towards a poor, widowed woman from a different race. Those four descriptors have been, and still very much are, the arena of multiple discrimination today. Taking our cue from the Bible, Christians must be implacably opposed to all these deeply embedded injustices in our country and around the world, whether that is asking why poorer black men are over represented in the grim figures of Covid-19 deaths; why significantly fewer black and minority ethnic people and women of all ethnic backgrounds are in positions of power and influence; how it is a black man can be killed by police when not resisting arrest in an horrifically brutal way and why women are still being harassed and abused on the street, in the workplace and in their own homes. These are acts of evil in opposition to God's law and God's grace. We cannot stand by even though we may feel helpless. What we can do, God being our helper, is to thoroughly examine our own hearts and attitudes and the systems and structures of which we are a part. We can ask the Holy Spirit to reveal our biases, our accepted now unconscious attitudes received long ago and where necessary confess and resolve to change. And we can learn from Boaz's exemplary words and actions as he demonstrates to us how to treat others well, with Godly loving-kindness, to his immense credit and to the honour of God. Amen.

Prayer of Confession ²

Merciful Father God, we thank you for your wonderful world and its beautiful and diverse people created in your image.

Help us now to examine our own hearts. (*pause for silent reflection*)

We ask for forgiveness for behaviours and attitudes that devalue or demean those who are different. Forgive us for our tacit acceptance of a society where privilege, partiality and advantage are often the passports to success and wealth. Have mercy on us for ignoring the reality of racism and bigotry, which deny or curtail the rights and opportunities of those of different ethnicities and cultures.

Give us the courage, determination and honesty to work and pray for a society governed by justice, equity and compassion, and underpinned by the belief that each person is made in your image, has an inherent worth and must be afforded dignity and respect.

Enable us to value and affirm diversity, as you do. This we ask in your precious name. Amen.

Hymn - Singing the Faith 346 ³

Christ is the world's Light, Christ and none other;
Born in our darkness, He became our brother.
If we have seen Him, we have seen the Father:
Glory to God on high.

Christ is the world's Peace, Christ and none other;
No one can serve Him and despise another;
Who else unites us, one in God the Father?
Glory to God on high.

Christ is the world's Life, Christ and none other;
Sold once for silver, murdered here, our brother -
He, who redeems us, reigns with God the Father:
Glory to God on high.

Give God the glory, God and none other;
Give God the glory, Spirit, Son and Father;
Give God the glory, God with us, my brother:
Glory to God on high.

Prayers for others ⁴

Heavenly Father,
we thank you for those brave women and men who,
armed only with faith in the God of truth and justice,
stood up for equality and human rights.

By the power of the Holy Spirit
help us to become change makers
who courageously work to transform your world
into one where all are afforded the dignity, respect and worth
deserving of those made in your image.

We thank you for breaking the bonds of sin,
and releasing us to be the people you want us to be.

May we never take the freedom we enjoy for granted,
but be inspired by your call to set the captives free,
to help those whose lives are characterised by oppression rather than freedom,
injustice rather than equality, and bigotry rather than fairness.

We pray for a time when all will be set free from the bonds
of partiality, poverty and pride to experience true freedom.

God of all peoples, we pray for all victims of racial hatred and discrimination. We pray for your
protection especially for those affected in our churches, our institutions of learning, our places of
work and in our communities.

We pray that we may be able to feel the power of reconciliation through the Holy Spirit.
Wherever there is division between us and others, because of our culture or ethnicity we pray
that we may all be led to reconciliation.

We pray that our young people will make meaningful contributions to build a world where
everyone, of any ethnicity, culture or religion, can live a fulfilled human life.

We remember those people who are sick, lonely, bereaved or despairing in our communities
especially those for whom we have a personal concern.

Silence for own prayers

Merciful Father, we ask you to fill our hearts with your love. Give us the grace to rise above our
human weakness, and keep us faithful to the Gospel of Jesus your Son. This we ask in His
name. Amen.

Lord's Prayer

Hymn – Singing the Faith 407 ⁵

Hear the call of the Kingdom,
Lift your eyes to the King.
Let His song rise within you
As a fragrant offering
Of how God, rich in mercy,
Came in Christ to redeem
All who trust in His unfailing grace.

Hear the call of the kingdom
To be children of light,
With the mercy of heaven,
The humility of Christ.
Walking justly before Him,
Loving all that is right,
That the life of Christ may shine through us.

*King of heaven, we will answer the call;
We will follow, bringing hope to the world,
Filled with passion, filled with power to proclaim
Salvation in Jesus' name.*

Hear the call of the kingdom
To reach out to the lost
With the Father's compassion,
In the wonder of the cross,
Bringing peace and forgiveness
And a hope yet to come;
Let the nations put their trust in Him.

King of heaven, we will answer the call;

Blessing

May the God who is united as three in one unite us across all that divides us and may the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with us now and always. Amen

Acknowledgements

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