

Forgive us when we suddenly grow cold towards others,
when we learn something about them that unsettles us.
We pray for those hurt by those who claim to speak in Your name,
but have separated others from Your love.
Give us the strength to speak Your unconditional love afresh.
Lord, in your mercy:
Hear our prayer, and let our cry go unto You. Amen.

Daily Devotions from the URC

Ruth

20th June – 3rd July 2018



Introduction

The book of Ruth is much loved and the famous line from Ruth to Naomi, accepting God has her own god, was often used as part of the marriage liturgy.

The story of the Moabite, Ruth, David's great grandmother is overtly sexual. It shows the difficulty in Levirate marriage where a close relation was to marry the widow to ensure the husband's line continued. Ruth catches the eye of her relative, Boaz, and Naomi ensures that Ruth offers herself sexually to Moab who then wishes to marry her - a slight complication of a closer relative, is swiftly dealt with.

The book has layers of meaning - is it a political parable of welcoming the outsider to counter the policies of Ezra and Nehemiah in post exilic Israel? Is it about the dignity of labour? Is it about powerful love between women? Is it about the evils of patriarchy? Perhaps it's about all these things.

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The Bible contains many such lists, and while the historicity of them cannot be verified, they do bolster the arc of Scripture, support prophecy and provide valuable insight.

As yesterday's author mentioned, the book of Ruth speaks powerfully about how the marginalised should be treated: the poor, the immigrant, the disenfranchised. You might not be aware that Ruth also speaks to a group of people who often feel rejected by church: the LGBT community. The connection between these two women, Ruth and Naomi, is a very special one. Ruth 1:16-17 is often used at weddings!

Looking backwards into Ruth's ancestry, we find the Moabites' beginnings in Genesis 19: Moab born to one of Lot's daughters, sired by her own father, an account which itself revolts us. Looking forward from Ruth, we find Israel's great King David with his notable personal relationships with Saul, Jonathan, Michal and Bathsheba. We might find these unsettling.

At Christmas, our readings about Jesus' birth begin with Matthew 1:18, missing out the first 17 verses. But if you read them, you will find another genealogy - for Jesus. (A similar list can be found in Luke 3:23-38.) There, you will find both Ruth and David.

Many people have felt judged harshly by the Church because of whom they love. If those same judgemental standards were to be applied to some of Jesus' ancestors...

Those very relationships recorded in the Bible that stand out from the normal can be found in the very ancestry of Jesus Himself!

Prayer

Lord Jesus, You say to us: "Do not judge, and you will not be judged." Forgive us when we judge others.

Tuesday 3rd July Ruth 4: 13 - 22

Walt Johnson is an Elder at Wilbraham St Ninian's, Chorlton, Manchester

Reading

So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the Lord made her conceive, and she bore a son. Then the women said to Naomi, 'Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him.'

Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. The women of the neighbourhood gave him a name, saying, 'A son has been born to Naomi.' They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.

Now these are the descendants of Perez: Perez became the father of Hezron, Hezron of Ram, Ram of Amminadab, Amminadab of Nahshon, Nahshon of Salmon, Salmon of Boaz, Boaz of Obed, Obed of Jesse, and Jesse of David.

Reflection

Hands up... who just glanced over those names at the end of today's reading?

You may have seen the many adverts for websites which allow one to research one's family, and others which will reveal our origins through a DNA sample. Ancestry and family heritage have always held a fascination for many. For example, a friend of mine has recently discovered a half-brother in Texas.

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Dr Nicola Robinson is an Elder at Augustine United Church in Edinburgh

Reading

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there for about ten years, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons or her husband.

Reflection

According to the United Nations, more than 65.6 million people are now living under forced displacement. A number that is larger than the population of the United Kingdom. A number that is increasing year on year. A number so huge that it means we can often forget there are individuals and families with their own stories, motivations and intentions behind it.

The Book of Ruth opens with one such story - a flashback about forced displacement and immigration. Naomi and her husband Elimelech leave their home, their family and community in Bethlehem and cross the border into Moab. A family fleeing their country to escape famine. A family fleeing with deep, gnawing hunger in their bellies. A family fleeing with fear about how they will be received and treated in their new country.

to pull his sandal off his foot and spit in his face, publicly shaming him (Deut. 25). Removing a sandal became common practice 'to confirm a transaction'. However, refusing to give the woman a home and perpetuate her husband's name was still seen as shameful. The Israelite (whose name is not known...poetic justice?) is less faithful to God's Law than the Moabite woman, whose steadfast love is described three times as *hesed* – God's lovingkindness (Ruth 1:8,2:20, 3:10).

Ruth's words to Naomi are fulfilled: 'Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.' The public affirmation and blessing of Ruth and Boaz by the people and the elders (4:11-12) places her among some of the great women of Israel. Today she is remembered as an ancestor of David, and named in the lineage of Jesus.

Ruth's story is about hunger and fear, love and commitment; it is about courage and risk – walking into an unknown place needing bread and welcome. This is the reality of life for many people today, fleeing hunger, poverty and war. The story is also about a society providing ways for people to survive: wheat left at the edge of the fields; laws which give support and security to widows, including Ruth the woman of Moab, ancient enemy of Israel.

Today in the UK our politicians have deliberately set out to create 'a hostile environment' for immigrants. Companies and councils drive spikes into the ground to prevent homeless people from sleeping in shelter. What welcome would Ruth find here today?

Prayer

God who looked on all that you made and declared it good,
Christ who spread out your arms on a cross in loving embrace,
Spirit who came in wind and flame to inspire and empower:
teach us again that your love is for all and inspire us to challenge
injustice and prejudice wherever we find it. Amen

it; but if you will not, tell me, so that I may know; for there is no one prior to you to redeem it, and I come after you.’ So he said, ‘I will redeem it.’ Then Boaz said, ‘The day you acquire the field from the hand of Naomi, you are also acquiring Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead man, to maintain the dead man’s name on his inheritance.’ At this, the next-of-kin said, ‘I cannot redeem it for myself without damaging my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it.’

Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging: to confirm a transaction, one party took off a sandal and gave it to the other; this was the manner of attesting in Israel. So when the next-of-kin said to Boaz, ‘Acquire it for yourself’, he took off his sandal. Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, ‘Today you are witnesses that I have acquired from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and Mahlon. I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite, the wife of Mahlon, to be my wife, to maintain the dead man’s name on his inheritance, in order that the name of the dead may not be cut off from his kindred and from the gate of his native place; today you are witnesses.’ Then all the people who were at the gate, along with the elders, said, ‘We are witnesses. May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you produce children in Ephrathah and bestow a name in Bethlehem; and, through the children that the Lord will give you by this young woman, may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah.’

Reflection

This deal is intended to fail. Ruth's name is left out of the conversation until the unnamed kinsman has agreed to buy the land. Result: a U-turn. The man wants the land but not the foreign woman who comes with it. He takes off his sandal, echoing an earlier practice which allowed a widow, whose husband's next-of-kin refused to marry her,

The best-selling author, Khaled Hosseini reminds us: “Refugees are mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, children, with the same hopes and ambitions as us—except that a twist of fate has bound their lives to a global refugee crisis on an unprecedented scale. Together, in solidarity with refugees, we must demand that world leaders take collective responsibility for finding fair, lasting solutions to this crisis. Together we must ensure humanity and compassion triumph over fear and intolerance.”

Many individuals and families today flee their homes and communities. Just like Naomi and her family, there is great fear but also hope in their heart that they will find safety and compassion. For me, walking the Way of Jesus means standing in solidarity with refugees so we can offer that safety and compassion. Walking the Way by petitioning the government over unfair or unjust policies. Walking the Way by providing money, food and clothing to aid agencies. Walking the Way by raising awareness in our churches or communities.

Prayer

Hospitable God,
who teaches us to welcome the stranger.
We pray for all refugees and immigrants:
those who have been displaced through famine,
those who have been displaced through climate change,
those who have been displaced through war and oppression.
Enable us to offer practical assistance
in terms of shelter, food and clothing.
May we demonstrate compassion
so that refugees and immigrants can be welcomed
as treasured guests.
In Jesus’ name, we pray.
Amen.

Thursday 21st June Ruth 1: 6 - 14

The Rev'd John Durell is a retired minister and member of Waddington Street URC, Durham

Reading

Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had had consideration for his people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, 'Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.' Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. They said to her, 'No, we will return with you to your people.' But Naomi said, 'Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me.' Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

Reflection

The Dutch writer Ellen van Wolde once described the Book of Ruth as a story of headscarves. These are migrant women, largely invisible – the kind of women who today might take the night bus into the city centre for their cleaning jobs, or might appear at the back of the corner shop as the nameless relations of the shopkeeper. They all have their stories, but we're largely oblivious to them.

When life's troubles come thick and fast, when governments threaten to plunge the world into disaster, when things have got so bad we fall into despair and give up on hope and trust in a God big enough to sort everything out, in a loving God caring enough and involved enough to intervene... that's when we are perilously close to functional atheism. Simply not believing who He is, what He can do, that He will... That's when we are in danger of being fools.

'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.' Trusting in Him regardless of what the world looks like, refusing to accept the world's explanations and so-called solutions, and pinning all of our hopes on God – that is true wisdom.

Anything else is the way of the fool.

Prayer:

Lord, I believe. Help thou my unbelief.

Monday 2nd July Ruth 4: 1-12

The Rev'd Heather Pencavel is a retired Minister and a member of Thornbury URC.

Reading

No sooner had Boaz gone up to the gate and sat down there than the next-of-kin, of whom Boaz had spoken, came passing by. So Boaz said, 'Come over, friend; sit down here.' And he went over and sat down. Then Boaz took ten men of the elders of the city, and said, 'Sit down here'; so they sat down. He then said to the next-of-kin, 'Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, is selling the parcel of land that belonged to our kinsman Elimelech. So I thought I would tell you of it, and say: Buy it in the presence of those sitting here, and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, redeem

5 But see that evil crowd!
They are struck down with dread,
Although they thought within their hearts
they would have ease instead.

The bones of all your foes
were scattered far abroad;
And you have put them all to shame—
they were despised by God.

6 May help from Zion come!
The LORD his captives bring!
And then let Jacob's tribes be glad;
for joy let Israel sing!

Reflection

The fool. We're taken aback seeing this word. Surely Jesus taught that we should not call anyone a fool? But checking my concordance, this word appears often enough in the Old Testament – in the Psalms and especially in the Book of Proverbs. Each time, there is a recurring theme; about God.

We are told that only a fool denies the existence of God, the sovereignty of God, and the goodness of God; the results for the fool are not good.

We're not fools, however. Here we are, reading His Word, taking in what He says, meditating on it in our hearts. No, the fool is that other person, the atheist, the humanist, the one who thinks they're too clever to need God.

A friend suggested her son pray about something and was told sharply that he didn't need a crutch. Such are the overt atheists. But even we can fall into the pitfall of functional atheism.

If these three women do make it all the way to Judah, at the best they are going meet with indifference. Naomi (meaning "Pleasant" – there's irony) has such a chip on her shoulder that no one would want to go near her. What kind of woman tells her bereaved daughter-in-law that her own sense of loss is the greater? Orpah (spell that one right!) now sees sense and realises that she will never make a home in a new country: better to go back and make a new life in Moab. But her sister-in-law Ruth clings to this difficult and demanding woman.

In many families the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law turns out to be the most contentious. And it looks as if this will be no exception. Ruth is by no means the quiet submissive creature we may have thought her to be. Instead, she shows she has a mind of her own, and is ready to go directly against Naomi's wishes. She is not afraid to take a risk. Life is going to be hard as a migrant and a widow in a strange land, especially as the one person who might have protected her now seems to want to be rid of her. But still she journeys on, all the way to Bethlehem. She may be as good as invisible: but there will be a story to tell!

Prayer

God of all our journeyings –
Your eyes are upon us all and you know the stories
of the people we ignore and overlook.
Broaden our vision and deepen our compassion
that your love may support and encourage
all who today travel on to new beginnings. Amen

Friday 22nd June Ruth 1: 15 - 18

Gordon Woods is an Elder at St. Columba's, Oxford

Reading

So she said, 'See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.' But Ruth said,

'Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people, and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried.
May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!'

When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

Reflection

Ruth's story is one of the most familiar of the stories in the Hebrew Scriptures, and one that has special significance for me, as my late mother read it at the blessing service for our Civil Partnership back in 2007. I think I probably first heard it while I was at primary school in the early 80s, when stories of people having to leave their homes seemed remote to me - or were perhaps untold - how unlike today when we see the war in Syria, Afghanistan and so many other places, driving people away from home and family.

In our reading today we hear Ruth's moving words of commitment to Naomi: 'your people shall be my people, and your God my God'; I'm almost tempted to suggest that when we next receive new members at St. Columba's we should ask them to say these words! There is no caveat, no half-heartedness, just a simple commitment to Naomi, her people, and her God.

and keep it stirring for a hundred years or more and turn out coffee coloured people by the score.

Prayer

Lord we live in mixed up times,
people of all colours, cultures, shapes and sizes
make up our communities
and you know and love each one of us.
Help us to love each other
with genuine acceptance not mere tolerance.
Help us to learn that love is greater than religion. Amen

Sunday 1st July Psalm 53

Dorothy Curtis is a lay preacher and elder at Halesworth URC in Suffolk

1 The fool speaks in his heart;
"There is no God," he says.
They are corrupt, their deeds are vile;
none walk in godly ways.

2 The LORD looks down from heaven
upon the human race
To see if any understand,
if any seek God's face.

3 They all have turned aside;
corrupt they have become.
Not one of them does any good—
no, not a single one.

4 Will sinners never learn?
My people they've devoured
As if they were consuming bread;
they never seek the LORD.

you, my daughter?’ Then she told her all that the man had done for her, saying, ‘He gave me these six measures of barley, for he said, “Do not go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.”’ She replied, ‘Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man will not rest, but will settle the matter today

Reflection

The other night I was watching the old film ‘Guess who’s coming to dinner’ where a blonde brings home her black boyfriend. Both parents have to grapple with this. Her mum says, ‘*We’ve brought her up to believe that all are equal, the colour of someone’s skin is no more important than the colour of their eyes, but we didn’t say marry one!*’ His mum says, ‘*They are so in love, we are old we’ve forgotten what it’s like to be in love.*’ The young man says of his girlfriend ‘*It’s not that she minds the colour difference; she doesn’t even notice it.*’

Race relations are happening right here in the book of Ruth. The last few verses remind us that a foreigner, a Moabite, despised and detested by the Jews was the great-grandmother of their greatest King, So what is all that about? Naomi sees something in her Moabite daughter-in-law that could bring two cultures together.

Ruth had said, ‘*Your people will be my people and your God will be my God.*’ Naomi encouraged her daughter-in-law to seduce Boaz then she was sent away in secrecy, but not empty handed, sent away with provisions. Naomi obviously knew Boaz well, she says ‘*For the man will not rest, but will settle the matter today.*’ A shrewd mother-in-law, a willing daughter-in-law and a man in love! The way is paved for the shaping of Jewish history as of course it is from this lineage that Jesus himself is born.

If ever a passage speaks into our relationships today it’s this. Blue Mink did it well many years ago when they sang ‘*What we need is a great big melting pot, big enough to take the world and all we’ve got*

What would it take for us to inspire people to want to speak those words to us? I sometimes feel that some of us have more in common with Naomi, and allow ourselves to believe that people finding faith would be better off pursuing their Christian journey elsewhere rather than with in our churches with the imperfections we know so well.

Perhaps we need to start as Ruth does, with companionship - to go with the stranger, to invite the stranger to lodge with us, and to declare that their people are our people - and that we are all God’s people?

Prayer

Lord, when we feel we have nothing to offer,
when we see our disappointments rather than opportunities,
when we feel that other people, and other churches,
would offer more;
give us confidence that we can make a difference -
that our gesture of welcome can begin a friendship;
that our encouragement can unlock talents;
that together we can build your Kingdom on earth. Amen

[Saturday 23rd June Ruth 1: 19 - 22](#)

The Rev’d Martha McInnes is Minister of Wellingborough URC

Reading

So the two of them [Naomi and Ruth] went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them; and the women said, ‘Is this Naomi?’ She said to them,

‘Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara,
for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me.
I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty;
why call me Naomi when the Lord has dealt harshly with me,

and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?’

So Naomi returned together with Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, who came back with her from the country of Moab. They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

Reflection

As a bedraggled pair of women wander through the streets, the townspeople pause. Someone catches a glimpse of a familiar turn of the head, a phrase that sounds familiar. They wonder, “Could that be *Naomi*?”

Naomi left home with her husband and her two sons years ago. They left for a better life in Moab. Has Naomi now come back? With this young woman? Where are the others? Her husband, her sons, her fortune? “Could that be *Naomi*?” Whispers run through the town. People stare at the “strangers.”

The whispers reach Naomi. Her response: “Do not call me ‘Naomi.’ Call me ‘Marra.’” “Naomi” means “pleasant,” but Naomi has changed. Having lost her husband, her sons, her home, she is now “Marra”—bitter. Naomi has travelled through the pain of grief to return home, and she carries nothing but bitterness, shame, and pain. Her new name indicates the change within her.

We have all experienced some kind of pain and loss. We, like Naomi, may struggle to name goodness and hope. Maybe grief has broken us. Or is it a recent diagnosis of illness, or a redundancy, or a fear, or a childhood trauma or . . . ? Our pain is so overwhelming that it has changed us. Instead, we carry the burden of it. Eventually we may feel like the burden—grief, illness, joblessness, hatred—is who we are. We have forgotten who we really are—a beloved child of God.

Brother David Stendl-Rast, a Benedictine monk, writes, “Gratitude emerges as an attitude we can freely choose in order to create a better

courage and determination, loyalty and devotion as so many risk danger and humiliation to find a safer and better life for their family. In our own families and culture, whether our “Pilgrim Fathers” seeking religious freedom, or generations of forebears crossing the world for a better life, it saddens me when they are honoured as great heroes, whereas today’s travellers are dismissed as foreign rubbish, or the poorest as scroungers. Let us find the heart of Boaz to welcome strangers from overseas, and strange ones from our neighbourhood, and the will of Boaz to make a difference in their lives.

Prayer

Liberating God, set us free:

to act honourably and fairly in dealing with the vulnerable
to seek ways to lift up those fallen on hard times,

or those with less advantages than us

to recognise the stranger as a fellow traveller,
as a friend yet to be made

to discern the experience and talents of others,
as a gift rather than a threat

to look out today for an opportunity

to share your grace with someone

to be generous of Spirit in using your gifts to us. Amen

[Saturday 30th June Ruth 3: 14 - 18](#)

The Rev’d Lena Talbot is Minister of the Blackburn North and East Pastorate

Reading

So she lay at his feet until morning, but got up before one person could recognize another; for he said, ‘It must not be known that the woman came to the threshing-floor.’ Then he said, ‘Bring the cloak you are wearing and hold it out.’ So she held it, and he measured out six measures of barley, and put it on her back; then he went into the city. She came to her mother-in-law, who said, ‘How did things go with

lying at his feet, was a woman! He said, 'Who are you?' And she answered, 'I am Ruth, your servant; spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin.' He said, 'May you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter; this last instance of your loyalty is better than the first; you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. And now, my daughter, do not be afraid; I will do for you all that you ask, for all the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman. But now, though it is true that I am a near kinsman, there is another kinsman more closely related than I. Remain this night, and in the morning, if he will act as next-of-kin for you, good; let him do so. If he is not willing to act as next-of-kin for you, then, as the Lord lives, I will act as next-of-kin for you. Lie down until the morning.'

Reflection

If written for today's market, this would be a story full of sexual overtones, or else a documentary about a vulnerable woman in great danger of abuse. However, it is of a time and culture with very different morals and customs. Even so, we still cringe, maybe even offended at the submissiveness of woman to man, of Ruth being treated like a chattel, and the paternalistic way she is treated, even in Boaz' kindness. But let us celebrate the qualities of a good man, Boaz; sensitive to Ruth's predicament, urging her to go before daylight in case of scandal, and giving her grain to take away; honourable and gentle in the way he deals with her; faithful and determined to fulfil any responsibility he has towards her. Related by marriage, Ruth is still a foreign immigrant, and yet Boaz sees her as family. As for Ruth, each time I read her story, she is a hero of mine – such devotion and loyalty to Naomi, such courage every step of the way, and determination and commitment to do everything she is asked, however dangerous, embarrassing, even damaging to her reputation. Here is amazing love, in whatever society and lifestyle.

Among today's vulnerable, those at the edge of society and especially asylum seekers and migrant workers, we can often see the same

life for ourselves and for others." Brother David suggests that practice of giving thanks for the simplest of things will begin to transform our pain.

Perhaps, if we can practice gratitude, bitterness will not overwhelm us or rename us.

Prayer

Loving God,
We pause. We listen. We hear our pain.
But we also hear the sound of our breathe.
We hear the whisper of your love and faithfulness.
Help us say, "yes" and "thank you."
Help us let go of "bitterness" and return to a place of gratitude.
Amen.

[Sunday 24th June Psalm 52](#)

The Rev Helen M Mee is minister both in Granton United Church, Edinburgh and Carlisle URC and is the Convenor of the URC Equalities Committee

1 Why do you boast of wickedness,
you man of power and might?
Why boast all day, O you who are
disgraceful in God's sight?

2 You plot destruction with your tongue,
so razor-sharp and keen.
You always work deceitfully;
3 you love things vile and mean.

You do not take delight in truth,
but in what's false and wrong.

4 You love all harmful, evil words,
O you deceitful tongue!

5 But God will surely bring you down
to ruin and disgrace;
He will uproot you from your tent
and from your dwelling-place.

He'll snatch you from the land of life
and carry you away.

6 The righteous, seeing this, will fear;
then they will laugh and say:

7 "This is the man who for his strength
on God did not rely;
He trusted in his wealth and power
to raise himself on high."

8 But I am like an olive plant
in God's house growing free;
I trust in God's unfailing love
to all eternity.

9 I'll praise you ever for your deeds;
my hope is in your name,
And in the presence of your saints
I will extol your fame.

Reflection

Psalms 52 is one of a short run of psalms which bring the Psalmist's call for godliness into sharp relief. In particular it challenges those who both rely on, and flaunt, wealth and, potentially, the less than ethical source of that affluence.

outrage that a woman was expected to give herself sexually to a man in order to find security; in the other there was a sense of the benevolence of Boaz and his kindness, with no hint of sexual favour or male power. I think this is something we all experience: how we approach texts depends on our life experience, learning and the image of God we relate to. In this text, for me, a woman had no choice but to submit to male power. This was of its time; what is horrifying is that this still happens today for people.

Whatever approach we take to Scripture it should speak to us and change us. It is important that we do not just read the texts, but we allow them to challenge us and inspire us to be sharers of light and love where we find ourselves, and as we are able.

Gracious God,
so often we come with preconceptions
and no idea that we carry so much baggage.
Help us to approach the words of Scripture with
open hearts, ears to hear and eyes to see.
May we then make time to be changed
by what we have experienced
and share this with those alongside whom we walk.
Amen.

[Friday 29th June Ruth 3: 6 - 13](#)

The Rev'd Kevin Watson is Moderator of the Yorkshire Synod and Co-moderator of General Assembly

Reading

So she went down to the threshing-floor and did just as her mother-in-law had instructed her. When Boaz had eaten and drunk, and he was in a contented mood, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came quietly and uncovered his feet, and lay down. At midnight the man was startled and turned over, and there,

Thursday 28th June Ruth 3: 1 - 5

The Rev'd Jenny Mills. Minister at Newport Pagnell URC and West End United Church, Wolverton. Convenor of the URC Children and Youth Work Committee.

Reading

Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, 'My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you. Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing-floor. Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing-floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do.' She said to her, 'All that you tell me I will do.'

Reflection

I remember, when I began training for ministry, becoming aware that there were different views on approaching Scripture: Conservative Evangelical, Liberal, feminist, Liberation Theology...and so on. I realised I needed to be aware when reading that this was the case.

We develop our views according to the life we have led and the people we have engaged with. Imagine being a woman who has been forced to live a life dictated by family? Imagine being forced to flee your home, and everything you have worked for, and being made to live in a refugee camp? Imagine being marginalised due to your sexuality or gender? One comes to the texts in the Bible with these experiences and sees texts in a different way to those for whom life has been straightforward or uncomplicated.

Last year I led a Bible Study in two different churches and got two different responses to this text. In one church there was horror and

Only those who trust in, and rely on, God will have reason to celebrate whilst those who build their confidence and power base on ill-gotten gains, hiding behind a torrent of sharp tongued and false rhetoric will find themselves deposed from their self-appointed position.

The Psalmist 'paints' a triptych of human experience for us; the interaction of futile wickedness and righteousness followed by the rejoicing of those who put their trust in God and God's steadfast or unfailing love.

In verse 5 we see the actions of God responding to the ungodly described at the beginning of the Psalm. I have been left wondering how this might have been portrayed within a Marvel Comic or character as the description seems to be not unlike the actions of, for instance Wolverine, Iron Man or Luke Cage.

But God will surely bring you down....uproot you from your tent.....snatch you.....and carry you away. (I would be among the first to admit that this perhaps says more about me than discloses many insights about our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.)

Thereafter we see the Psalmist's turn to the third section (verses 8 & 9) with images of trust, unfailing love, praise and hope. The godly are likened to an olive plant growing freely in God's house. This is a powerful simile not only because the olive tree is known to live, flourishing and fruitful, for, at least, hundreds of years – long enough to seem like eternity, but also because in ancient Hebrew culture it is described as the first among all trees and thought of as a symbol of beauty and blessing. The comparison of the godly to an olive plant underlines that God is the source their blessing.

Prayer

Loving God, help us take a moment

to envision ourselves as an olive tree;
steady and reliable, in for the long haul,
sporting beauty in our gnarled trunks
and the fresh shoots springing from as-if-dead wood,
flourishing and fruitful,
without need to make ourselves out
to be different from who we are or cruelly critical of others.
May we always be content with the growth and fruitfulness
that discipleship can bring. Amen

Monday 25th June Ruth 2: 1-7

The Rev'd Dr Gwen Collins is a member of Avenue St Andrews URC, a retired minister and chaplain to the Moderators of General Assembly

Reading

Now Naomi had a kinsman on her husband's side, a prominent rich man, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. 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.' 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. Just then Boaz came from Bethlehem. He said to the reapers, 'The Lord be with you.' They answered, 'The Lord bless you.' Then Boaz said to his servant who was in charge of the reapers, 'To whom does this young woman belong?' The servant who was in charge of the reapers answered, 'She is the Moabite who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab. 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.'

Reflection

Kindness is a key element of this passage, and it's a gift we sometimes forget in this modern and fast-moving age. Boaz's kindness to a stranger is the catalyst for his eventual marriage and is also an echo of God's kindness to us as 'strangers in the world'. It is interesting to note that Ruth has leftovers to the meal provided by Boaz, which reminds us of the leftovers found when Jesus fed the multitudes. Kindness is always more than enough in our lives.

Boaz's kindness to Ruth doesn't end with just a meal. He also gives his men instructions for keeping her safe and helping her as she carries out her work during the day. A kindness, once offered, gives birth to many more of the same. In our own working lives, how kind are we to those around us? And what more can we do for them to help and respect their contributions?

When Ruth returns home, she doesn't keep all her spoils to herself but offers them to Naomi as well so that both women have what they need. When Naomi realises who has protected her daughter-in-law, she is the first to praise Boaz for his kindness, and beyond that to acknowledge that it is the Lord who has made this miracle possible. It is indeed God who offers His kindness and grace to us every day of our lives.

Prayer

Dear Lord, thank You for the gift of kindness and indeed for all Your many kindnesses to us. Open our eyes to the opportunities to show kindness and care to those around us, in our work and in our home lives, and through our acts of charity, may the eyes of many 'strangers' be opened to Your wonderful love. Amen.

admit wrong. And I pray for me, too; help me see myself through your eyes. Amen.

Wednesday 27th June Ruth 2: 14 - 23

Anne Brooke, regular attender at Elstead URC

Reading

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. When she got up to glean, Boaz instructed his young men, 'Let her glean even among the standing sheaves, and do not reproach her. You must also pull out some handfuls for her from the bundles, and leave them for her to glean, and do not rebuke her.' So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley. 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. Her mother-in-law said to her, 'Where did you glean today? And where have you worked? Blessed be the man who took notice of you.' So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked, and said, 'The name of the man with whom I worked today is Boaz.' Then Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, 'Blessed be he by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!' Naomi also said to her, 'The man is a relative of ours, one of our nearest kin.' Then Ruth the Moabite said, 'He even said to me, "Stay close by my servants, until they have finished all my harvest."' Naomi said to Ruth, her daughter-in-law, 'It is better, my daughter, that you go out with his young women, otherwise you might be bothered in another field.' So she stayed close to the young women of Boaz, gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests; and she lived with her mother-in-law.

Reflection

The story of Naomi, Ruth and Boaz is a jewel of a story. It is dramatic and romantic. In a few short vignettes the key characters are conveyed to us with a depth of understanding that is timeless and transcends culture.

Today's passage is a hinge point in the story. Ruth has cast her lot in with Naomi and they have arrived in Bethlehem. What next? How will they live? Will life take a turn for the better after the desperate heartache of chapter 1? What resources can they draw upon to make a new life for themselves?

Kinship was the social security system of their society, as it is for many societies around the world still today. I experienced this when I lived in Papua New Guinea. The benefits and obligations of kinship are paramount. How might Naomi re-connect into this network? Would she and her foreign daughter-in-law meet with acceptance or rejection?

Ruth goes gleaning, and the story presents us with a timely God-incidence. "As it happened, she came to the part of the field belonging to Boaz ..." Ruth's character and behaviour opens the way for this God-incidence to bear fruit. When Boaz comes to see how the harvesting is going, his servant gives an excellent report of Ruth's hard work.

What encouragement and challenge is there here for us?

- There is light at the end of the tunnel. Whether in our personal lives, or in our life as a church community, times of loss, struggle, want and hard decisions will, under God, begin to change for the better.
- God-incidences happen.

- Returnees and refugees need recognition and space to make a new life.

Prayer

Thank you Lord God,
for the depth, drama and dynamism of human life.
If our current situation is tough,
help us to trust in your brighter future.
If we are able to give recognition and space to foreigners today
help us to do so, as we walk in the Way of Jesus, Amen

[Tuesday 26th June Ruth 2: 8 - 13](#)

The Revd Dr 'frin Lewis-Smith is minister to the URCs in Darwen and Tockholes.

Reading

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. 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.' Then she fell prostrate, with her face to the ground, and said to him, 'Why have I found favour in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?' But Boaz answered her, 'All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. May the Lord reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!' Then she said, 'May I continue to find favour in your sight, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant, even though I am not one of your servants.'

Reflection

Perhaps this passage is meant to be comforting. We discover that Ruth has a protector watching over her as she works. But I don't find comfort here. When Boaz tells his men not to lay a hand on Ruth, I am angry that he did not have a more universal rule that kept any woman safe in his fields. His non-molestation order is a sign of a toxic culture in which abuse of the vulnerable is apparently inevitable.

Sometimes, sexual harassment is explained away as a spontaneous expression of desire. If we believe this, we advise potential victims to be less desirable and let the harasser off the hook for their actions. It may be more helpful to understand that unwanted words, unwanted touch, and sexual violence are ways to gain power over someone else and to feel powerful.

Victim blaming and gossip also satisfy a desire for power. I am better than the person whose behaviour causes me to raise my eyebrows. I am wiser than the person who became a victim. Shaming someone is a way to demean them. Too often we shame victims of sexual violence, finding ways to consider them complicit in their unwanted experience. If Ruth's field work had ended in rape, would it be assumed to be her fault? Unwanted touch is not the victim's fault.

Paul the Apostle wrote "God chose the weak things of this world to shame the powerful" (1 Corinthians 1:27). God takes the side of the powerless. When God exposes shame, it is not those we shame but the powerful who must hang their heads. Test yourself against these questions: who am I taking power from? whose shame do I enjoy? If they stir an answer bring this to God in prayer.

Prayer

I pray for those who say "me too" when hearing stories of women in danger. I pray for those who say "me too" when they hear someone