



Weekly worship resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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Today's reading

Ruth 1: 6-18 (“Naomi and her Moabite daughters-in-law”)

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.

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. Amen.
(NRSV)

Today's hymns

I danced in the morning when the world was begun (CH4: 404)

God is love, his the care, tending each, everywhere (CH4: 193)

It's me, it's me O Lord, standing in the need of prayer (CH4: 493)

God Of day and God of darkness (CH4: 217; tune:615)

Father Eternal, Ruler of Creation, Spirit of Life, by whom all things are made (CH4: 261)

In the Name of the Father and of

This sermon was preached in a summer service in 2014 when our theme for the season was the parables of Jesus.

Just what is the book of Ruth? A beautiful story? An interesting story? A story that is a natural candidate for being seen as a biblical parable? Well, not particularly, mainly because it doesn't have much to do with God. It's a romance, all about a faithful daughter-in-law. But if we dig a little deeper, we find that Ruth is not just a story about love and devotion. In its own way, it is also a parable with a very hard-hitting message.

A parable is, in the words of Bernard Brandon Scott, a story which, "is not really about what it seems to be about. Its real subject is disguised and can be discerned only through insight."

If we look at the book of Ruth in that kind of way, we find its hidden message – and that message is one which is both subversive and very, very liberating. It is, in fact, nothing less than a message in the Bible which bravely challenges other messages in the Bible.

Where will we start? How about thousands of years ago, when this story was being written. The main characters are the refugee Naomi, her daughters-in-law Ruth and Orpah, and Ruth's new husband Boaz. But the writer of the story is living several generations after Naomi, Ruth, Orpah and Boaz. The book itself makes that clear.

This is a period of unusual crisis for the Hebrew people: a time when the outsider is feared and when there is a real push towards what today we would call "ethnic cleansing". History had not been kind to the Jewish nation. First Babylonian invaders had destroyed the holy city of Jerusalem and its Temple, taking the Jewish leaders into exile. Next, the Persians conquered the Babylonians and came to see the exiled Jews as a useful way of expanding the Persian Empire. And so, the Jewish leaders were sent back to Jerusalem free and able to restore the Temple, to rebuild the city and its economy, and (most importantly for those Persians) to pay their taxes like a good and diligent colony should be doing.

The years immediately after the exile of the Hebrew leaders marked a critical point for the Jewish people, as they could so easily have lost sight of who they were and what their traditions had been. The Jewish leaders wanted to make sure that their ethnic and cultural identity returned to where it had been, so they looked inside the Hebrew Bible at the ancient book of Deuteronomy, and found there these words:

No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord ...

The Bible was telling them loud and clear that Moabites were bad. Moabites were not "us". Moabites were to be excluded from Israel: a tragic situation, if you happened to be a Moabite wife of a Jewish man, or for that matter the child of such a couple in Israel. If you had Moabite blood in your veins, you were out. Out and away. And all because of Deuteronomy.

Isn't it interesting then that the writer of the book of Ruth has as his main character someone he describes again and again as "Ruth the Moabite". This title is important, because the writer of Ruth is pointing out, again and again, that she is one of those hated foreigners.

That fact alone completely transforms the book's meaning for us. You might think that the whole point of the book is to demonstrate Ruth's faithfulness to her mother-in-law, and her willingness to travel many miles, setting up home in a strange land. But no. The book of

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

Ruth is not meant to be some sort of an example to us. It is meant to be some sort of a challenge to us, and to all our closed-minded ways.

Just picture those Jewish leaders, liberated from captivity by the Persians and returned once more to Jerusalem. They were intent on rebuilding both city and Temple, but they were also intent on making sure the Hebrew people stayed ... the Hebrew people. Marrying foreigners was seen in some sense as breaking with God's ways: a bit like "trespassing" into forbidden territory.

What a terrible fate awaited those wives and children of Jewish men. They were cast out from Israel, forced to head back to distant lands and distant family members, who might very well refuse to accept them. And why? Because the ancient teachings of the Hebrew people were being taken literally; applied in a draconian and inhuman way, in order to disown and in order to deport. It may have been legal, but it certainly wasn't just.

And Moabites like Ruth were right up there at the top of the list of those who could never be accepted into Israel. The Bible said it, plain and clear there in the scrolls of Deuteronomy. And that was that. Except, that *wasn't* that ...

The writer of Ruth knew what he was doing when he put pen to parchment to record this old historical account of a faithful Moabite woman. And in particular, he knew exactly what he was doing when he wrote the very last word found in the book of Ruth: the name, "David". The whole book of Ruth leads up to its final word, the name of King David. The book's conclusion tells its readers that this foreigner, this hated Moabite, Ruth, became the wife of Boaz ... the mother of Obed ... the grandmother of Jesse ... and the great grandmother of David, arguably the greatest hero king in the imaginations of the entire Jewish nation.

So now we see can just what a parable can be like in the hands of a fearless writer. It not only offers an example of good living. It actually has the power to challenge and even to change a whole society.

As we know, the book of Deuteronomy, with its harsh instructions on casting out the foreigner, stayed in the Bible. But Deuteronomy was not the be-all-and-end-all of Jewish theology, because as we also know, the book of Ruth made it into the Bible too: the Hebrew Bible which later, of course, was viewed as the Christian Old Testament.

I think we can legitimately see Ruth's quiet, beautiful voice offering a strong counter-message to that of Deuteronomy, reminding us that the Bible is not one book, but many, presenting us with a vast range of viewpoints and voices from across the ages. Viewpoints which build up a broad impression of what scripture is all about.

Ruth, presents itself as a "challenge parable" to that earlier writing from Deuteronomy. It asks in the clearest of tones: "If Moabites are to be cast out of Israel, how come King David himself was one eighth Moabite?"

Or, to cast the question in an entirely different way: "If you were to take the strict laws of Deuteronomy at face value, could the great King David ever have been born???"

Into a climate of fear, Ruth speaks her gentle yet challenging voice: a single voice, yet one which proved strong enough to make people think afresh and change their ways. May she make us do just that today. AMEN.

Praying for others

Loving God, you know the pain of our world.

You see young lives blighted by poverty, neglect and indifference.
You hear the cries of families whose lives are lived in anxiety and fear.

You feel, along with these your children,
the sadness of knowing that life is not being lived in fullness.

Today, as we bring to mind so many children and young people
who find it hard to fit in at home, in school or across the community,
we turn to you in prayer, asking that you would bless them.

In this nation which has so much, we ask for justice so that those who have so little
might come to thrive, where now they struggle.

We recall before you teachers, youth workers and all who have a passion
for young lives, that they may change those lives one by one.

And for our leaders, we pray for your wisdom,
that politicians and planners may be guided by your truth.

In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

And finally ...

Ellen Ellis reflects on this – hopefully – warm and sunny season:

July is usually holiday time. This year, things are different to anything any of us can remember. You could be having a break away from home, something very much to look forward to, or perhaps a “staycation” is your choice.

Could one say, “We’ve been on staycation for four months!”? Lockdown confined us all. Now, however, we have more freedom. We live in a beautiful part of Scotland with access to seashore and countryside on our doorstep. An at home holiday gives the chance to revisit favourite places – to have time to take in the scenery we are liable to take for granted.

The poem by W H Davies, “Leisure”, comes to mind:

What is this life if, full of care, We have no time to stand and stare.

I particularly like the last lines:

A poor life this, if full of care, We have no time to stand and stare.

Without leaving home, you can “stand and stare” ... look at the birds visiting your garden! Sparrows squabbling over seed, blackbirds chasing through plants, hunting for worms and the amusement of watching those ever-present pigeons trying to land on a bird table!

We have the chance to admire our handiwork in the garden – having used lockdown time for that, if we are so inclined – or even to finish the book you started. Like embroidery? Why not pick up that half-finished piece? (That’s close to home – I have one featuring a little girl on a beach, sharing her ice cream with two donkeys). There we are! Back to holidays again.

“Holidays” centuries ago meant holy days or saints’ days, when the population had one day free from work and toil. How blessed we are to have the holiday time we can enjoy, however we choose.