

SERMON: Sunday – 7 November 2021 – Rev Alistair Cowper

Widows, Willingness and the Great Cause

Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17

Mark 12:38-44

The story of Ruth and the birth of her son Obed tells us so much about the kind of God God is.

That God would have anything to do with such a precarious and fragile existence, which very nearly doesn't happen, says so much about how God identifies with the poor, the least and the last, and is embedded in the lives of the humble in heart.

Naomi, who's lost her husband, then both her sons in law. And Ruth who's lost her husband and seems destined to be barren and desolate for the rest of her days - these are the key characters in this tragedy.

But the supposed hopelessness of this situation would only be if we were to forget that God is in the story. The Lord is mentioned 16 times in the book of Ruth, one of only 2 books in the Bible named after women.

Women are the central characters in the story, principally Naomi and Ruth. And LOVE is the great spirit at work, motivating, encouraging, and keeping things moving.

As Evidenced in the opening verse of today's reading in Naomi's desire to find Ruth a new home

Naomi said to her, 'My daughter, I must find a home for you, where you will be well provided for
(Ruth 3:1)

Naomi, despite her own reduced circumstances, is putting the needs of her daughter before her own. That's love in action. That's any parents natural desire, to see their children safe, settled, prosperous, and with a future to look forward to.

And love is seen also in Ruth's response - her willingness to go along with her mother in law's plan ...

'I will do whatever you say,' Ruth answered.
(Ruth 3:5)

An echo of what Mary would say when visited by the angel Gabriel, or of what Samuel would say when visited by the Lord in a dream.

Willingness to go along with the God breathed plan. A plan, which in Ruth's case, really would result in the coming of the "Guardian-Redeemer" (3:14), and the Saviour of the World.

Imperfect people, who faced grief and trauma along the journey of life but whom God chooses to carry forward the blessing of the cosmos and in whom God finds obedient hearts. God works in and through imperfect people like you and me.

And yes there is a preference for the most vulnerable in this kingdom.

As The Psalmist in Psalm 146 declares that,

The Lord protects the foreigners among us.
He cares for the orphans and widows

Naomi and Ruth were testimony to that declaration. They were recipients of Gods preferential Grace despite their poverty.

As was the widow who came to the Temple in the days of Jesus with her two tiny coins. I've no doubt she knew the goodness of the Lord in her own life.

Her generous response was commended by Jesus not for the amount of money she gave but for her attitude, her willingness to give herself into the care of the one who first cared for her.

As Jesus put it,

she, out of her poverty, put in everything – all she had to live on
(Mark 12:44)

She was willing to give herself to the Great Cause.

The widow is commended by Jesus for not being like the teachers of the law, with their flowing robes and important seats and places of honour and showy, lengthy prayers.

Who, according to Jesus,

devour widows' houses! (And) will be punished most severely!

Talk about not pulling any punches with his words. That's hitting them where

they hurt. Jesus isn't saying this behind their backs. He's teaching in the synagogues and in the Temple where anyone could hear. Word would soon get to those teachers what he had said. He wouldn't say anything in their absence that he wasn't willing to say in their presence - a good rule for anyone who wants to live a transparent life.

Jesus shows us that standing up for and caring for widows is more important than what others might think of what you've said.

And that speaking against injustice matters more than avoiding criticism of the guilty.

The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down (Psalm 146:8). It is God who judges: he brings one down, he exalts another (Psalm 75:7).

He mocks proud mockers but shows favour to the humble and oppressed (Proverbs 3:34).

This might be a particular challenge for the rich in light of the current climate crisis and COP26. We see on our TV screens pictures of poor, poor people, whose homes have been washed away by floodwaters or whose crops have been devastated by drought or fire.

Its the poor that at the moment carry the heaviest burdens caused by climate change whilst the rich continue on destroying rather than stewarding the one planet we all share.

But God is surely in this story too. But where?

In the prayers of his people; in the small acts of kindness; the small acts of giving; the willingness of his people to give themselves to the cause of justice - and the climate crisis is a justice issue because it unfairly affects those who are least able to deal with it.

God is love and God is seen in the willingness of the heart that says, like Naomi, I want to find a home for you, where you will be well provided for; and to say that about the neighbour and the stranger, and even those in distant lands.

Let us pray,
O God, loving Father of all
You care for the poor, the widow and the orphan
You have given us a wonderful home in which to live
Help us all to find that home
And to be willing to make it home for all.
In Jesus name
Amen.