

SERMON: Sunday – 11 December 2022 – Rev Alistair Cowper

Without Whom: Ruth

Ruth 3:1-18; 4:13-17

Matthew 11:2-11

It sounds like John the Baptist had his doubts about Jesus. Was he really the messiah?

You can understand it. There he is imprisoned for preparing the way for the Lord and the time probably dragged on slowly. When o when would change come? When o when would Israel be free?

Jesus doesn't directly criticise John's doubting but instead points to the evidence which is there for those with eyes to see.

the blind receive their sight
the lame walk
those with a skin disease are cleansed
the deaf hear
the dead are raised
and the poor have good news brought to them

These were all signs that the Hebrew prophets had spoken about concerning the coming of the Messiah.

The signs were there to see. Proof of the fulfilment of the ancient words of prophecy, the age old promises of God to renew the earth and everything in it.

Ok yes there wasn't yet wholesale change. Transformation wasn't yet universal. Will it ever be? God hopes so.

And God's plan was, as it says in Hebrews 11 in that great chapter about how people have exercised faith down through the ages, that these things would be only be fulfilled together with us.

For God had something better in mind for us, so that they would not reach perfection without us.
Hebrews 11:40

The miraculous signs of Jesus were there as a foretaste of what was to come.

And Christmas makes us think about the gift of God with us as the Gift that keeps on giving; keeps on giving until all of that stuff is done in all its fullness.

All the blind receive their sight
All the lame walk
All those with a skin disease are cleansed
All the deaf hear
All the dead are raised
All the poor have good news brought to them

We are all recipients of this good news; receivers of the Gift that keeps giving.

How can we be agents of this good news, passing on the Gift for others to experience?

Here's a picture I saw on social media this week which gives us the answer

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(SLIDE)

Feed the hungry etc Simple!

Or as others have said, there might be, should be evidence of faith in the way believers practise their faith, signs or fruits of the Spirit, love, joy, peace some or all of which might or should be seen growing through our lives. And if they're not then something's not right.

But let me go back to Ruth.

Like all of us, Ruth didn't know what lay before her. But she made the decision to stick with Naomi with all the uncertainty that was there before them. Like John the Baptist or his father Zechariah or Joseph and Mary, all may have been bewildered or wrestle with doubts in their own journeys of faith.

Faith is not signing up to a list of beliefs, as perhaps many have seen it as. It ebbs and flows, through dark and light, it grows and evolves.

But all of us, like Ruth or Mary, have to consent to evolve. To wonder. To stretch; as Richard Rohr puts it, to learn that faith and doubt are not opposites—that beyond all the easy platitudes and pieties of religion, we serve a God who dwells in mystery. If we agree to embark on a journey with this God, we will face periods of bewilderment.

I don't think any of us believes the same at age 50 as we did at 15? The life of faith is a life of change.

I heard someone describe faith as TRUSTING THAT GOD CARES WHAT IS HAPPENING RIGHT NOW. And that's quite a good definition. To know that God is interested and cares about the tiny details that you and I face moment by moment. And to step forward with that mindset.

We know that faith is not dependent on things that are seen. It's often a step in the dark. Though perhaps not completely dark for if one's faith is put in the Light then can the darkness ever be too dark.

As the Psalms say,

Even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you, O God.
Psalm 139:12

And the Light blessed Ruth.

Soon after arriving in the little town of Bethlehem there was employment. Then favour upon favour, grace upon grace. Provision of food and shelter and family. And soon, a husband, And a son.

And 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".

They named him Obed, which means servant of God; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David, the ancestor of Jesus, the Messiah.

Did Ruth know what lay before her?

No.

Could she have predicted her role in the coming of the eternal kingdom where love rules in the heart?

No.

So what did she do?

She took the one little step before her, the one she felt was the right thing to do. And she entrusted Naomi's God, now her God, with the rest.

Let me finish by pondering what might have happened if ...

If the harvest had not failed and Naomi and her boys had stayed at home... If the doctors in Moab had been able to help and one of those men had got better... If Ruth had said 'OK' like Orpah did when Naomi told her to turn back... If Ruth had said 'No' like any sensible woman would have done when Naomi explained her plan....

If Boaz had said 'No' when Ruth made her bold proposal... If Mary had said 'No' when Gabriel told her what God had in mind...
If just one of the links in that chain had been broken,
then Jesus might never have been born, or at least not in the right place at the right time,
into a family with royal connections
and some extraordinary people in its past.

But where does that take us, unfathomable God,
and what does it tell us about you?

Are we to praise you for controlling the forces of nature and manipulating our choices
so that everything goes as you have planned?

Or do we wonder and praise you all the more
for not stepping in and taking over,
but letting nature take her course and people make their choices,
and sticking with us whatever the consequences may be?

Gracious, life-giving, risk-taking God, as you have thrown in your lot with us
so may we, like Ruth or Mary,
put our trust unreservedly in you,
and find in the trusting that you are true.