

## Circuit worship 21 June 2020 – Ruth week 3

### Introduction

Hello and welcome to our worship!

My name is Jenny Dowding and I'm a retired minister worshipping at Wesley.

This Sunday is the third in a 4-week series on the Old Testament book of Ruth, and our preacher today is Rev. David Shaw.

As we begin our worship, we focus our hearts and minds on God. Let us pray.

Loving God,  
in whom all things are made whole,  
you sent your Son our Saviour  
to heal a broken world.  
Visit us with your salvation,  
that we may be blessed  
in body, mind and spirit;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Our hymn firstly reminds us of our roots in the Methodist revival – born in song! But then the hymn traces our deeper roots, as we sing of God's work of love and grace in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit.

### Hymn – StF 21/H&P 486 Born in song!

1

Born in song!  
God's people have always been singing.  
Born in song!  
Hearts and voices raised.  
So today we worship together;  
God alone is worthy to be praised.

2

Praise to God!  
For he is the one who has made us.  
Praise to God!  
We his image bear.  
Heaven and earth are full of his glory;  
let creation praise him everywhere.

3

Christ is King!  
He left all the glory of heaven.  
Christ is King!  
Born to share in our pain,  
crucified, for sinners atoning,  
risen, exalted, soon to come again.

4

Sing the song!  
God's Spirit is poured out among us.  
Sing the song!  
He has made us anew.  
Ev'ry member part of the Body;  
given his power, his will to seek and do.

5

Tell the world!  
All power to Jesus is given.  
Tell the world!  
He is with us always.  
Spread the word, that all may receive him,  
every tongue confess and sing his praise.

6

Then the end!  
Christ Jesus shall reign in his glory.  
Then the end  
of all earthly days.  
Yet above the song will continue,  
all his people still shall sing his praise.

Brian Hoare (b 1935)

### Prayer of approach

Lord God, we worship and adore you.

Your holiness is beyond our understanding;

your majesty is beyond our imagination;

your love is greater than we can conceive.

But you have revealed yourself to us

through our experience of creation and the opportunities of life,

and in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus,  
so that we can affirm  
that it is by you that we have come to be;  
it is to you that everyone owes allegiance;  
your kingdom enfolds all people of every age, every race, every colour, every tongue,  
and it is in your will that all find their peace.

Father of us all, you care for each of your children  
and you know us all by name:  
as your family, though physically separated, we celebrate together,  
knowing we are united in your love.

We worship you; we honour you;  
we adore you; we thank you;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

*(Companion to the Lectionary, volume 3, page 138 ed. Neil Dixon 1983)*

### **Prayer of confession**

Forgive us, Lord, that our actions so often fail to match our words.  
We have failed to trust you, and to place our hope in you.  
We have failed to love our neighbour as ourselves.  
We have failed to forgive others as we have been forgiven.  
Forgive us, we pray.

### **Words of forgiveness**

The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance,  
that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. *(1 Timothy 1:15)*  
Hear then Christ's word of grace to us: Your sins are forgiven.  
Thanks be to God.

### **Lord's Prayer**

In our first week in the book of Ruth, Chris Evans reminded us that you don't get any lower than being a poor, foreign, destitute, childless widow. Ruth was marginalised in so many ways. Our gospel reading is a part of a conversation Jesus had with another woman on the margins of society.

Listen now for God's word to God's people.

### **Gospel reading – John 4: 24-29**

### **Hymn – StF 629 God of my faith (or H&P 675 Have faith in God my heart)**

1

God of my faith, I offer you my doubt,  
for life at times seems far too dark for me,  
and my belief becomes more insecure,  
when worldly cares produce uncertainty.

4

God of my love, I offer you my pain,  
when I'm alone and feel nobody cares,  
in aching age or in rejected youth,  
you bear my cross and dry my human tears.

2

God of my hope, I offer you my fear,  
when I am scared by my anxiety,  
when all I hear is suffering and woe,  
in all my shadows you will walk with me.

5

God of my life, I offer you my dreams,  
light in the darkness where I hide from view,  
light in my faith, my hope, my joy and love,  
light in my life and all my life in you.

3

God of my joy, I offer you my grief,  
when I sink down in sadness or despair,

when in depression I cannot be touched,  
I pray in all my depths to find you there.

Colin Ferguson (b. 1937)

## Introduction to reading

### The story so far .....

Whether or not you've been sharing in the past two weeks' services, here's a brief summary of where we are in the story of Ruth.

An Israelite family in Bethlehem left their home and travelled to the land of Moab. Naomi, her husband Elimelech, and their two sons Mahlon and Chilion, left Bethlehem because of famine. Whilst in Moab, the two sons married Moabite women, but sadly, in time, all three men died, leaving Naomi and her two daughters-in-law widowed. When Naomi heard that there was a harvest again in Israel she decided to return home, encouraging her daughters-in-law to remain in Moab. At Naomi's urging, one of them, Orpah, eventually returned to Moab, but the other, Ruth, insisted on journeying with Naomi to Israel.

Ruth went to the fields to glean among the sheaves following the harvesters. When she ended up in a field belonging to Boaz, a relative of her father-in-law and husband, Boaz treated her with kindness and generosity. When Naomi heard this, she explained to Ruth that Boaz was a close kinsman and therefore one with the right (and responsibility) to redeem, a Guardian-Redeemer. Naomi recognised God's providence and protection at work in Boaz's actions.

We continue the story in chapter 3 of the book of Ruth.

Listen now for the voice of God within the words of Scripture

## Reading - Ruth chapter 3

### Hymn – StF 614 God loves you (or H&P 25 He's got the whole world)

#### *Could not find you-tube link*

*God loves you, and I love you,  
and that's the way it should be.  
God loves you, and I love you,  
and that's the way it should be.*

2

You can be very sad, I can be very sad,  
and that's the way it can be.  
You can be very sad, I can be very sad,  
and that's the way it can be.

1

You can be happy, and I can be happy,  
and that's the way it should be.  
You can be happy, and I can be happy,  
and that's the way it should be.

3

We can love others like sisters and  
brothers;  
and that's the way it should be.  
We can love others like sisters and  
brothers;  
and that's the way it should be.

Anonymous

## Sermon – Rev. David Shaw

### Ruth Chapter 3

Just my luck! I get the sex scene to preach about!! I have only preached about sex once. As I started, I looked up at the congregation and there was my mother-in-law! That brings us neatly back to Ruth and Naomi.

Important questions to hold in mind as we journey with this chapter – who has power? Who is vulnerable? Who is in control? Who if anyone is exploiting who?

There are some disturbing echoes of other Biblical sex scenes. Esther chapter 2 has Esther being prepared for her sexual interview with King Xerxes by the harem eunuch using perfumes, good washing getting dressed in best clothes. Then there's David and Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11. Both of these stories have vulnerable women and powerful men with control and authority. They smack of #Me Too and Harvey Weinstein. Is this story different?

Dr Rachel Starr in her talks re Ruth quotes various feminist commentators who wonder if Ruth is not being used by Naomi for Naomi's survival. Some wonder further whether Naomi might be using Ruth's sexuality for her own gain – sex trafficking! These two women were in the survival business. We don't like those sort of ideas creeping into this nice story.

We might want to dismiss this notion as nonsense. Before we do I want you to imagine a family in a poor part of Africa or Asia or Eastern Europe. There's mouths to feed and little or no income. Father (it usually is the father!!) is approached by people who offer money for a daughter. The family survive because there is now money and food. The daughter is sacrificed and ends up on our streets.

When I was in Cheadle where suburban north Cheshire meets built up urban Manchester I had a student minister working with me. He was from the city and urban young man with a heart of the city. One Palm Sunday he was preaching about the city (Jesus entering the city). He spoke about the sex-workers walking the streets of the city and about how shocking we in the suburbs found the idea. He then threw it back at us – where do you think the clients who go to them come from?

Naomi tells Ruth what she must do in the early part of this chapter. Like Esther she must prepare herself with washing, perfumes and best clothes. How many sets of clothes did poor Ruth have? At this stage Naomi is in control and Ruth is the one to be exposed put in a vulnerable position literally! Then we're told Ruth concurs. She agrees to do Naomi tells her to do. They are in this together. We need to remember Ruth had been married for 10 years. She wasn't naïve. She knew how these things work! We don't know Boaz's sexual history though. This story is in the Jewish scriptures and Jewish scholars love to pour over texts and gnaw away at them. One such scholar says Boaz's wife died just as Naomi returns to Bethlehem with Ruth. Others reckon he had always been unmarried and was sexually naïve. I know it's all speculation, but it helps Boaz become a 3D character not a flat person on a page.

I love moment when Boaz is jolted from sleep, possibly deep sleep after the food and drink only to find a woman at his feet. I can hear him thinking 'she wasn't there when I went to sleep!' Boaz asks her 'who are you?'. This is the second time this question has been asked. The first was in chapter 2 when Boaz asks a servant 'who does that younger woman belong to?' The answer 'A moabitess from Moab?' – a foreigner from a foreign country!! The third is later in this chapter. The precise question is hidden in our translations. NIV has 'how did it go?'. In the Hebrew it says 'Who are you?' Naomi is worried that the time with Boaz has changed Ruth. Where will Ruth's loyalty now lie? Will Ruth still 'cling' to Naomi? Will Naomi be left to survive on her own? In the question Boaz asks in the darkness of the threshing-floor Ruth can identify herself and her relationship. She replies, 'I am your servant Ruth.'

We are not told whether there was sex beyond the intimacy of sleeping in the same space together. What we do have is another blessing invoked on Ruth:

"The Lord bless you, my daughter. This kindness is greater

than that which you showed earlier.'

There was no blessing or kindness by Xerxes for Esther, no blessing or kindness by David towards Bathsheba or between Weinstein and his victims.

Boaz promises to do what Ruth has asked even though we haven't heard Ruth ask for anything. In the patriarchal society of Naomi, Ruth & Boaz it is Boaz who has power and influence as a man and as kinsman.

Before they part in the twilight before dawn Boaz pours 6 measures of barley into Ruth's shawl. The story teller had prepared us for this though we probably missed it. Boaz was sleeping by the grain pile. It can't be incidental in a story where bread is a theme.

A couple who are struggling to survive need their grain. Provision for those on the edge. Provision for the widows.

Somewhere in this story God is working God's purposes out through a bitter possibly manipulating widow, a foreigner and a man different in nature and behaviour from other Old Testament men!

This passage touches some big subjects. You might like to consider:

- where is the #Me Too campaign now? How can these voices be heard? Do we want to give the space for the voices to be heard?
- How does poverty far away come knocking on our doors?
- Who is the 'Moabitess from Moab' in our community/nation who is enriching us and through whom God is working out God's purposes?

### **Prayers of intercession**

*(based on prayers by Tim Aldred in "Wild Goose big book of worship resources", copyright © Tim Aldred/The Iona Community, with my editing)*

Ruth, Naomi and Orpah were destitute, in need of refuge:

We pray for an end to poverty.

Bring us your harvest of justice and peace.

Ruth was a foreigner, of the 'wrong' religion and race:

We pray for an end to racism and the prejudice that feeds it.

Bring us your harvest of justice and peace.

Ruth, Naomi and Orpah were women, with fewer rights than men:

We pray for an end to discrimination and to the violence and abuse it feeds.

Bring us your harvest of justice and peace.

Boaz had power – land, money and authority:

We pray for all who hold power in our complex world,

especially those advising and those making decisions in this time of global pandemic.

Bring us your harvest of justice and peace.

Ruth, Naomi and Orpah were grieving:

We pray for those who have lost loved ones,  
those who are ill, and all who care for others.

We pray for an end to suffering.

Bring us your harvest of justice and peace.

Ruth found a home with Naomi and Boaz:  
May we find community between us, and a home with you.  
Bring us your harvest of justice and peace.

**Hymn – StF 615 – Let love be real (or H&P 374 - Thou God of truth & love)**

1

Let love be real, in giving and receiving,  
without the need to manage and to own;  
a haven free from posing and pretending,  
where every weakness may be safely known.  
Give me your hand, along the desert pathway,  
give me your love wherever we may go.  
As God loves us, so let us love each other:  
with no demands, just open hands and space to grow.

2

Let love be real, not grasping or confining,  
that strange embrace that holds yet sets us free;  
that helps us face the risk of truly living,  
and makes us brave to be what we might be.  
Give me your strength when all my words are weakness;  
give me your love in spite of all you know.

3

Let love be real, with no manipulation,  
no secret wish to harness or control;  
let us accept each other's incompleteness,  
and share the joy of learning to be whole.  
Give me your hope through dreams and disappointments;  
give me your trust when all my failings show.

Michael Forster

**Dismissal and blessing**

May God the Spirit bless you with a restless discomfort about easy answers, half-truths and superficial relationships, so that you may seek truth boldly and love deeply.

May God the Spirit bless you with holy anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people and of the earth, so that you may tirelessly work for justice, freedom, equity and peace for all of God's creation.

May God the Spirit bless you with the gift of tears to shed with those who suffer from pain, rejection, discrimination, or the loss of all that they cherish, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them.

And may God the Spirit bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you really CAN make a difference in this world, so that you are able, with God's grace, to do what others claim cannot be done.