

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost
Esther 3.1-5; 4.13-17 / *Hebrews* 9.24-28 / *Mark* 12.38-44
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
12 November 2006

“WHAT HAPPENS AND WHAT IT MEANS”

~Paul H. Friesen~

Today is the Sunday after Remembrance Day, a civic holiday when we recollect the sacrifices of those who went to war for our country in our place last century. In one way or another, many of us entered into this remembrance yesterday. It is an annual day when we also reflect upon the sacrifices that face or await those who are now enlisted. This we all know, I'm sure. But it wasn't always the case.

Remembrance Day 2006 in Halifax could hardly have been imagined by those in the trenches of Europe in 1917 or by those cleaning up the nightly rubble in the streets of London twenty-five years later. It is seldom easy to understand the meaning of the hard things that happen to us while we are in the midst of them. This is at the root of what we call 'faith'—famously defined for us in the book of *Hebrews* as 'the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.'¹

This morning we have heard three very old stories: the story of a young, exiled widow called Ruth; the story of a poor, unnamed widow in an occupied land; and the story of a Jewish preacher and healer who died crucified to a Roman cross. These are stories whose meaning was hard to fathom in the moment, but stories that are none the less full of purpose for us who hear them now. That is why we read them, 'lest we forget' the hard things about human life and the great things about God's mercy which turns the hard things into 'things we can live by'.

'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.' This is a sinister beginning.

But these are the opening words of the book of *Ruth*. They warn us that trouble lies ahead because everyone knew that Moab had a very troubled relationship with Israel. Israelites believed that the nation of Moab was descended from the child born to Abraham's nephew Lot, from a story told in the book of *Genesis* about drunken incest in the shadow of an apocalypse, the destruction of the city of Sodom by fire from the heavens.²

Israelites also knew the stories about how Moab had tried to block their route to the Promised Land in the days of old by hiring a sorcerer to curse them, and they knew

¹ *Hebrews* 11.1. Unless otherwise note, all biblical quotations are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

² *Genesis* 19.30-38.

the stories about how Moabites had tried to seduce Israel into orgies of worship underneath Moabite idols.³ They repeated the story from the early days of Israel in which the Moabite King, Eglon, had invaded Israel and Israel responded by sending a left-handed assassin disguised as a diplomat to finish off Eglon in his throne room.⁴

This is how Israel and Moab got along in the days leading up to the story of Ruth. It shows the desperation of the Jewish couple, Elimelech and Naomi, who sought relief from famine in a hostile land, their two sons in tow. Naomi was left a widow after a few years, but then her sons married—to Moabite women, which was against Israelite law. And then her sons died, leaving her two foreign, pagan daughters-in-law but no children. So ten years after her arrival she began to call herself not Naomi, but ‘Mara’, a word which means ‘Bitter’. She set out for the land of her youth, for her home village, empty handed.

And here the story takes a strange turn. One of Naomi’s daughters-in-law, Ruth, insists on accompanying Naomi back to Naomi’s village. Ruth pledges to leave her own country and stick with Naomi till death, to worship Naomi’s God. And so Ruth, a young foreign widow, walks with an old, bitter widow to a land she can’t imagine will love her.

There are no children on this sad journey, no future. And today’s psalm, a psalm sung on pilgrimage to Jerusalem, points out what a sad thing this must have been in ancient Israel.⁵

If you read the book of *Ruth* through you will see that Ruth has a softer landing than you might expect. There are no signs of prejudice in the village. But the pity is evident, and it is this pity that must feed Naomi and her only family, the Moabite widow. They lived from hand to mouth, counting on the generous provisions of Israelite law, and on a kind relative, Boaz, to actually observe the law. But it is not enough for the future. Naomi knows that when she dies, Ruth will be unprotected in a land still foreign to her.

Naomi is too old to bear children now, but Ruth isn’t. It is clearly children that will ensure Ruth’s future. But will anyone want to marry a foreign widow? And so Naomi takes the initiative with a plan, and urges Ruth to offer herself to her kind, bachelor relative, Boaz under cover of night—a risky endeavour. ‘He will tell you what to do,’ says Naomi, though she can only hope Boaz is different from so many men, and that he has a kinder view of Moabites. As you know, Boaz preserves Ruth’s honour, and marries her, bringing her legitimately into the family line of the village. And Ruth bears a child. It is a happy ending, but not a Hollywood ending.

The villagers, who have slowly drawn together around Naomi and Ruth sum up the significance of the birth: ‘Blessed be the Lord who has not left you without next-of-

³ See the stories in *Numbers* 22.1-24.25 and 25.1-3.

⁴ See *Judges* 3.12-30.

⁵ *Psalm* 127

kin...[This son] shall be to you a restorer of life and an 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.' Ruth the mother, the foreigner, is surrounded by the village women—her mother-in-law by her first husband becomes nurse to her son whom the villagers themselves name 'Obed'.

And as everyone know, the story concludes, Obed was to become grandfather to David, the greatest King Israel would ever have, the ancient hope that would one day be named Jesus Christ.

So many things should not have happened: the famine, the exile of Naomi's family, the death of her husband, the marriage of her sons to Moabite women, their childlessness, the death of her own sons, the journey of Ruth to an enemy land, her marriage to an Israelite. These were the hard things, the wrong things. Naomi and Ruth did not know the final result of all these things—on one did. They knew only the things that happened to them as they did, and that God would somehow make meaning out of them, though they didn't live to see all of it.

Jesus spoke of another widow, centuries later, a widow he found in the outer courts of the temple in Jerusalem, a city under foreign rule, Roman troops in the streets. His disciples were watching what fundraisers call 'major donors'—Jesus does not despise them as they drop their silver into the offering box, the 'treasury'. But his eyes are on a little, insignificant event. A woman, obviously a poor widow is dropping two little copper coins in.

The facts were obvious. The copper coin, the *lepta*, was the smallest coin possible to use. The two the widow put in were worth together one *quadrans*, which was 1/64th of a *denarius*. A *denarius* was what a poor labourer was paid for a day's work.⁶ In modern terms the poor widow dropped in the treasury about \$1.00 or perhaps \$1.50.

What does Jesus make of this? The rich gave out of their abundance—a good thing, says the Lord throughout the Scriptures. God gives generously to us, and out of our abundance we give back to God for God's worship in the Temple, and for the honouring of the poor made in Gods image. It has always been this way.

But things are so much more than they appear. Jesus said: 'She out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.' As John Chrysostom put it long ago: 'It was not money but rather her intention that prevailed. Without this disposition one will not be able to do with ten thousand talents of silver the very thing that the two coins can do.'⁷ The disposition is the disposition of faith, of doing without knowing, without seeing the greater meaning. The purpose and the meaning it is God's to work out.

⁶ Ben Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), p.335.

⁷ In *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Mark*, ed. Thomas Oden and Christopher Hall (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), p.177.

So it was in the book of *Hebrews*. The disciples of Jesus could not have known that the tragedy of Jesus' death would be the sacrifice that made sense of our tangled human history, that redeemed humanity, that made sense both of empty time and time filled with disaster. 'Jesus entered into heaven itself,' said the author, 'now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.' This was and is the heavenly reality of the earthly tragedy. This is the way God works among us, the story of God's providence.

Does this all mean that each of us takes no responsibility for life—does it mean that we let happen what seems about to happen? Does it mean someone else has responsibility for our families, not us? Does it mean that we don't put her hand to shaping the future of this parish?

No, of course not!

But it does mean that faith, and faithfulness, are the best responses to God's providence. But it also means that we don't control our future. How did Ruth and Naomi live? How did the poor widow give? What did Jesus and his disciples think? It's all there in our tradition; it's all summed up in our creeds and in our Eucharist. We exult in the purpose of life which is revealed from time to time. But we do not demand that God reveal it to us—purpose is the fruit of faith, 'the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.'

This we confess in one of our Eucharistic prayers: 'When we turned away from you in sin, you did not cease to care for us, but opened a path of salvation for all people.'⁸

It is this 'path of salvation' we celebrate this morning with Naomi and Ruth, with the poor widow in the temple, with Jesus and his disciples.

⁸ In 'Eucharistic Prayer 1,' *Book of Alternative Services* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1985), p. 193.