

PENTECOST 23
31/10/21
CAVES BEACH

Song – Bless the Lord O My Soul

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vSxocnlaN0A>

NOTICES

We ask you to keep Mark and Judy in your prayers as Mark recovers from his surgery on Friday. It is expected that he will be off work for today and the next two Sundays. All being well he will return on Sunday 21 November 2021.

Don't forget that Next Sunday we will be all back together and celebrating Holy Communion. Hopefully you have all read the letter we sent with the service reminding you of the restrictions we need to follow. Lu and I are both excited about the prospect of meeting face to face again and we hope you are too. So all being well we will see you next Sunday.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Praise the Lord!

We will praise God as long as we live.

Happy are those whose faith is in God!

God keeps faith forever.

God's justice is for the oppressed!

Food for the hungry, freedom for the prisoners, sight for the blind.

The Lord watches over strangers

and supports the orphan and the widow.

The Lord will reign forever!

Yes! We will praise God!

OPENING PRAYER

Proclaim confidently that God reigns.

We rejoice that God has never left us and never will leave us.

Make clear the relevance of God's Word.

We rejoice that the challenge of the prophets and the teaching of Jesus

is for us and always will be for us.

Be sure all are within God's care.

**The helpless baby, the active teenager, the busy young mother,
the volunteering senior: none are separated from God's love.**

Bring praise and thanks to God, for all God is and all God will be.

We sing with our voices, we respond with our mind, we return love from

the depth of our hearts. Amen

HYMN – Love Divine, all Love Excelling
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TPUiTADbXU4>

PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING & CONFESSION

How overwhelming is your love, O God. How perfect are your ways. In love you have created all that is. In love you have reached out to establish covenant with your people. In love you sent your Son to make us free. In love you gave your Spirit to empower our lives.. In love you have promised eternal life. For all this, we thank you and praise you. Receive our love, too, for you alone are worthy of worship and praise. We adore you, and offer you all the glory, through Christ our Saviour. *[Pause]*

Holy God, we know that there is one driving principle at the very heart of this universe - the principle of love. You call us to love you and to love our neighbour as ourselves. How hard we find it all. We find it hard to love you, for sometimes your face is shrouded in mystery. Sometimes your voice is drowned out by the calamities of life. Sometimes our doubts take us far from your presence and often our selfishness causes us to disregard you all together. We find it hard to love our neighbours too. It would be alright if we could choose the ones to love - but to love all others, O God, that is so hard. And even to love our very self is not always easy. Who we are is not always loveable. Can you forgive us and place the seeds of love in the soil of our sinfulness? Can you overcome our selfishness that closes others out and blocks us from experiencing the fullness of your love?

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

Jesus says, "I have come that you might have life, and have it abundantly." Hear also this word of salvation: "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him". (John 10:10 and 3:17) All that needs to be done to set us free from the bondage of sin has been completed in Christ, and to all who desire salvation, God declares that in Christ we are a new creation. Through the power and love of the cross, let each of us know in our hearts, we are forgiven. *We respond by saying together, Thanks be to God. Amen.*

READINGS

*** Ruth 1: 1-18**

1 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. ²The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they

were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. ³ But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴ These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, ⁵ both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

⁶ 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 considered his people and given them food. ⁷ 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. ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ They said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." ¹¹ 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? ¹² 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, ¹³ 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." ¹⁴ Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

¹⁵ So she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." ¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ 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!"

¹⁸ When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

*** Mark 12: 28-34**

²⁸ One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" ²⁹ Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our

God, the Lord is one; ³⁰ you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' ³¹ The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." ³² Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; ³³ and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbour as oneself,'—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." ³⁴ When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask him any question.

HYMN - Strong and Constant

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6iHg9ypngOo>

SERMON

The Book of Ruth comes into our Sunday lectionary for just two Sunday's every three years. It is too beautiful to let it pass by, don't you think? So even though you might know the story very well, let's sit back and enjoy reflecting on it again this morning! Actually, even though I know it well, I'm forever getting mixed up remembering which woman is Naomi and which one is Ruth!

Why do we love it so? Is it because it is about a trusting and loving relationship? Is it because of the self-giving of the younger woman to care for the older one? Is it because it connects in a deep way to our own sense of need for companionship? And in any case, by considering it again, are we able to reflect on our own lives and what God asks of us as we care for one another? Is this why it is still relevant today? I think so, and for reasons beyond that too, because we find issues mentioned in this book, that certainly have their contemporary counterparts. So many aspects of life are covered, for instance: the ravages of famine, disease, bereavement, racial discrimination, infertility, the treatment of strangers, mixed marriages and also the very human desire just to survive. All these issues are found here in the Book of Ruth.

So first a few reminders about this book to get us thinking.... It is quite a short story of only four chapters - in my Bible it is only three and a half pages in length. In the Old Testament canon of scripture it is squeezed between the Book of Judges and the two books of Samuel, so it is like a little oasis really! Interestingly, even though it is placed early in the Old Testament, theologians believe that it was written quite late, in fact after the exile to and from

Babylon. So you have the story the book is based on that would be very old, preserved as it was from the oral folk-lore about King David and the origins of his family, that goes back to about the 10th century BC. But then it is written down about five centuries later, around the 5th century BC, which was the time of Ezra and Nehemiah when the Israelites were coming back to their homeland from Babylon. For those of you who have studied these things you might know too, that this is rather like the book of Job, because it also was originally from a very ancient folk-tale and then written down much later.

And you might be thinking well that's all very well, but knowing all that isn't much help to me today. My response is that I think it is really worth knowing why this little book was written down and kept and thought important enough to have been chosen to be placed in Holy Scripture. If we understand the why, then we can maybe get to the nitty-gritty of what God might be particularly asking us to learn from it.

So what are we dealing with as far as this story is concerned? We are dealing with a family who is living in the world of two opposing cultures. Elimelech is the husband of Naomi, and he decides that due to the horrific famine in the area of Bethlehem where they lived, that the family will cross over the Jordan River to the eastern side and live in the country of Moab. They must have been desperate because between those two countries, there had been centuries of hostility. Maybe Elimelech felt - even saw - that the land over the river was literally greener. It is the perennial story of migration that people are making all across the globe today. And as climate change affects more and more people this aspect of survival over the coming decades is going to be much greater. Close to us, we know that some Torres Strait Islanders are already in trouble with rising sea water. Similar islands, which are coral atolls like Kiribati and Tuvalu, have been vulnerable for a long time now. The people of the Trobriand Islands of PNG where I've worked, for instance, dig down into the coral so that their yams can grow - but now with the sea rising the tubers are being affected by the sea water seeping up through the soil which lays on top of the coral. So we might well ask, how are people going to feed themselves? It is a different sort of famine, but it is still a famine. Where will people go? In the Book of Ruth, Naomi and her husband and their two boys were trying to survive during their famine, and they do that by going to live in a hostile country which also has the added problem of people worshipping gods that are not of their own faith. And within all this scenario, is the story of the wife and mother, Naomi, who against the odds will remain true to believing in the living God of Israel.

I say against the odds because Naomi is hit by tragedy. Her husband dies (maybe he was weakened by the famine and the journey) and she is left with two boys to bring up far from her own home. The years pass, and these young men end up marrying Moabite women by the names of Orpah and Ruth. So somehow this family seems to have been able to integrate into the

different culture and society, and yet Naomi continues to hold fast to her faith in the God of Israel. It would not have been easy. I think of the West Papuans today. West Papua has been overtaken and ruled by Indonesia since 1969, the year of the very suspect referendum. So you have Melanesian Christians being ruled over by Asian Muslims. People find themselves in a very difficult living situation. I am not wanting to make a judgement on the socio-political situations near to us - this is just what has happened - but I mention these issues because you can see that here in this Book of Ruth we have definite parallels of today's struggles. This ancient story is about tolerance, about determination, and about love in the turmoil of their own day.

And it is also certainly about tragedy. Because not only does Naomi's husband, Elimelech, die, but she then has the death of her two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. We are told that the death of these two young men occurred about ten years after they had arrived in Moab. Now left in a foreign land, bereft of husband and two sons as well, Naomi, grieving, was again in a perilous position. This story is almost like a feminine version of Job isn't it, don't you think?

The story then moves into its next stage where there are now just these three women who are all now widowed: Naomi, Orpah and Ruth. The older one is originally from Judah, and the two young ones are Moabites. What will they do? Naomi decides it is best if she returns to her homeland. She thinks the two younger ones should stay and remarry in their own land. In the end, Orpah makes the decision to stay, but Ruth decides to travel back to Judah with Naomi. So here we have a young woman now, making a decision due to love for her mother-in-law, to travel to what was for her, a foreign and hostile country, and one with a different culture and religion. This is a very big step for a young woman to make.

Now I mentioned earlier that this story was actually written down about the time of the exile in the 5th century B.C., so can we take note of what was happening socially then? This is the time of Ezra and Nehemiah and the return from Babylon. During that time there was a great struggle because many Israelites had married foreign wives and the governors of Judah established some very firm reforms when they began to rebuild Jerusalem. One of these was to re-establish the old marriage laws - meaning that Israelites could only marry Israelites. So any marriages that were in place and did not conform to this law were forcibly broken up. There must have been tremendous heartache right across the land.

So, it is thought then, that the Book of Ruth was written down to show that what actually matters most to God is genuine love - not whether a person is Jew or Gentile, Israelite or foreigner. It is not blood or marriage that matters most to God. Ruth is a Moabite remember, so the message here is that

although she is a foreigner and will be excluded due to these marriage laws, that she gives an example of loving care at its best. And therefore I want to suggest, that Ruth was written and preserved, to help people see new ways - to accept people whoever they were, and that this mattered above all else. And as the book continues on we will see how with that foundation of love, that God is enabled to bless even beyond the wildest imagination.

And by the way an interesting insight is that the names of the main characters in this book are symbolic: Ruth for instance, means "companion," while Orpah, the daughter-in-law who did not follow Naomi back to Bethlehem, means "disloyal," while Boaz who we will meet later, means "strength". The way this book is written then is almost allegorical.

So then, what might this little book be saying to us today? Isn't it the case that in every era we are facing issues that require hard thinking over and over again? The issues that we face today might be presented differently, and different vocabulary might be used, but nevertheless the saga of coping with change is repeated, isn't it? And the point is, how do we respond? We are always travelling into "new lands" aren't we? How do we travel into whatever those "new lands" might be for us? We need not confine our thinking to a geographical relocation. Just consider the social change that has taken place in our society over the past fifty years, or given the topic of sexuality over just the past five years or even less! These are "new lands" as it were, to negotiate, aren't they? This is the perennial issue of change. We are all in this together! And this little book of Ruth is inspiring us to hold fast, in every situation in which we might find ourselves, to the basic foundation of our faith - and that is - that God is love.

The New Testament passage from Mark's gospel today makes that very clear. Jesus says we must, "Love God with all our being - and love our neighbour as ourselves". He very clearly taught that we cannot love God without loving our neighbour. You will remember the question in Luke's gospel, "And who is my neighbour?" and Jesus answered the rich young ruler's question with the story of the Good Samaritan who was the one person who demonstrated love, and yet was the one who society despised. And similarly, the Book of Ruth, you see, is all about the loving relationship of two women who are from cultures and faiths that actually traditionally despised one another - and yet this is where, as I've already mentioned, that we are going to see just a little further on in the story, God's wonderful blessing. This story confirms that when we love God with all our being we will be accepting of people who look different from us and whose lifestyles and even religion are not the same. We will be liberated to trust God enough to believe that neighbours are the same as we are. The Good News from Jesus is that this kind of love is achievable. It is possible to love others so much that polarisation ends, and healing begins. This is how faith communities show the love of Christ, it is how families love one another with the love of Christ, it is

how each of us, if we love God, are to live. Only by doing this, by living in this way of love, we may hear Jesus say to us also, "You are not far from the reign of God."

The Lord be with you. Amen

HYMN – In Christ there is no East and West
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TpITJOShix0>

PRAYERS FOR THE OFFERING

Let us respond to our loving God with the gift of our offerings:

Gracious God, receive this offering, and the offering of our lives, that we might worthily serve you, and completely love you. In the name of Christ. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

(Thank you to Rev Bob Willoughby for preparing our prayers this morning.)

Precious Lord, Your word tells us about a wisdom that comes from you. In James Chapter 3 and verses 17, 18: 'But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first pure then peace loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.'

Lord God, give this kind of heavenly wisdom to those who meet soon in Glasgow for the climate summit. May the attendees work together for the good of this planet and make wise choices.

We also pray for the students and teachers who have gone back to school this week. Give the teachers wisdom as they shepherd the children in their classes. We also pray for the students preparing for their H.S.C. exams. Give them peace and insights as they sit for these important exams.

We pray for our Church Council. Our elders and all who have any responsibility within our Fellowship that they might have courage, foresight and love as we prepare to get back together in the next few weeks. We especially pray for our minister Mark as he enters hospital for yet another operation. Give wisdom to all medical staff as they do their duty and use their expertise each day for the benefit of others.

We pray for our Politicians that they too might have the wisdom that comes from heaven. Scott Morrison, and Dominic Perrottet. Are out Federal and state leaders. Bless them with your presence as they make decisions that affect our part of this nation.

We also pray for members of our church and family also friends who are sick or in distress. May they be touched by you Spirit in such a way that they might feel your peace and your presence in their lives and in the lives of their family. Hear our prayer Lord, in the name of Jesus our Saviour and friend who taught his disciples to pray

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours
now and forever. Amen.

HYMN – Take My Life and Let it Be

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Of4l5bTdZ8M>

COMMISSIONING & BENEDICTION

Love the Lord your God
for you are loved beyond all your wildest hopes.
Love your neighbour as you love yourself
for you are loved in the heart of community.
Love with everything you are
for you are loved with all that God is and has.
Love as you are loved and live in peace. Amen

We go in love and may love fill our hearts, infuse our thoughts and enliven our souls.

And now may the blessing of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be among you and remain with you always. Amen

SONG Sevenfold Amen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6lGqWkB7BE>