

## ***The First of All, Ruth 1:1-18 & Mark 12:28-34, 11/4/18, NM***

### **Beginning**

The OT text today is from the Book of Ruth. Ruth is one of those OT books that upon first look doesn't seem all that relevant to us as Christians. To be sure, the whole of the OT is important. It provides us with a sense of history, continuity and context. All too often I hear people express wonder upon being told that Jesus was Jewish. Jesus and his doctrine did not appear out of nowhere. He was part of a tradition that had already been well documented and well developed by the time of his birth. It is certainly true that after his death there was a schism between his Jewish followers and the Roman and Greek churches founded by Paul. It is also true that when the Roman Emperor Constantine made Christianity the State Religion of Rome in the Fourth Century AD, the Greco-Roman identity of The Church was established once and for all. However, none of that should obscure the Jewish character of the original movement or the importance of the OT in coming to understand the nature of our faith.

When I first read the assigned text it seemed to me that there were numerous points of interest, but I wasn't sure why it had been included. The Gospel reading is from The Gospel According to Mark - which the Lectionary has favored the past few months. The specific selection from Mark 12 is important, for it quotes Jesus at a moment when he was being pressed to define his doctrine on the fly.

As he was talking to a group of Sadducees, a scribe overheard them and decided himself to ask Jesus a question. He asked, What is the first Commandment of all? Jesus answered in two parts. The first was a quote from Deuteronomy 6, in which Moses was addressing the assembled People of God before they crossed the River Jordan and entered Palestine for the first time.

*Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are*

*away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*

Jesus only used the first sentence, but the scribe would have known the quote well. Jesus then added something of his own.

*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

By juxtaposing those two sentiments, Mark was telling his readers - and us - that The Way was part of the Jewish Tradition - yet was also something new. That Jesus was not rejecting The Torah - he was distilling it down to its essential elements and adding a kind of compassionate humanism that wasn't always apparent in the OT.

## **Middle**

Ruth fits into this schema in at least two ways. First, when we consider the part of Ruth's story which is told in the beginning of the text, we must be struck by the fact that she was not a Jew but a Moabite. Her association with Judaism and the Jewish people was through her marriage to one of the sons of Naomi - a Jewish woman who - together with her husband - Elimelech - had settled in the country of the Moabites during a famine, following the Jewish invasion of Palestine. Because it was not a center of Jewish settlement, when Naomi's two sons came of age, they both married Moabite women. Life was not easy in those days, and in time not only did Elimelech himself die - both of the sons also died, leaving the three women alone to support each other.

After a time, Naomi decided to go back home and she released Ruth and the other widow - named Orpah - from her service so they could in turn also go back to their own birth families. Apparently neither had born any children. It seems the three women had become quite close because neither Ruth or Orpah wanted to leave Naomi. She finally managed to get Orpah to go home, but Ruth was a different matter. She begged Naomi not to send her away, but to allow her to

stay and go with her to live among the Jews. Naomi finally gave in and the two of them went to find Naomi's family.

That's as far as our reading goes, but I think in order to understand these readings properly and see how they're connected, we have to go further into Ruth's story. You see, Naomi and Ruth found Naomi's family and were embraced by them. Naomi was immediately given a place in the household, while Ruth was allowed to glean the barley fields behind the reapers. Apparently Ruth was quite beautiful for she was noticed right away by one of Naomi's rich relatives - a man named Boaz. Naomi approved of the match and encouraged Ruth to encourage Boaz and in short order the two were married and started a family. Here we get to why the story was and still is important. Boaz and Naomi's first son was named Obed, and Obed when he grew up, became the father of Jesse and Jesse was the father of David - the greatest of all the Kings of Israel and Judah and ancestor of Jesus of Nazareth.

Ruth was one of the first converts to Judaism whose story appears in The Bible and in a profound sense her experience presaged the process whereby every Christian makes a conscious decision to accept Christ and join The Church. No one is born a Christian. Even those of us who are baptized as children are expected to make a profession of faith upon reaching adulthood. Thus we make a decision to stand with Christ, just as Ruth make the decision to stand with Naomi.

Furthermore, the fact that she was David's grandmother means that she has a direct connection to him and therefore also to Jesus and the unfolding drama of human history that is still being told. Her symbolic and spiritual significance is beyond question or doubt and therefore her life story and the way it is recorded in scripture is very important.

*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.*

Are these not the very words one of the disciples might have said to Jesus? And do we not say something very similar in our hearts when we think of Christ? Isn't this the same kind of commitment we make to the Church? Can we not imagine these values being handed down from Ruth to Obed to Jesse and to David? The same values David lived by and the heart of what Jesus teaches us?

## **End**

When a person makes the leap of faith and embraces Christ as both personal savior and Savior of The World, he or she has entered a new country. A country that is at once completely strange and strangely familiar. While many of us take up church life as children, many make the choice as adults - just as Ruth chose to stay with Naomi. For me it was the adult route.

My family was not churched. Not even close. My mother was Jewish and to the best of my knowledge had never attended a Temple even as an experiment. Both of her parents were academics who came of age at a time when thinking people rejected organized religion as a matter of principle. That doesn't mean they weren't spiritually aware and deeply ethical people - they were. They just didn't do religion. My father had actually grown up in the church. His father was a musician - a pianist and organist whose primary source of income and status was his position as Musical Director of a large Episcopal church in Harlem dominated by other West Indian expatriates. It hadn't stuck with my Dad though. He left the church as soon as he got old enough to make his own decisions. He certainly never went to church when I was growing up, and never encouraged me to explore Christianity. We never talked about it but I assume that his feelings mirrored those of my Mom's family - he couldn't bring himself to believe in something so unscientific.

It was 12-Step that got me thinking about God and church in a new way. I reached a hell of a crisis in my life right around the time I turned forty. I was drinking heavily and had been for some time. I had been functional but miserable. Finally it all fell apart. To say I had reached the end of the line would

be an understatement. I was flying blind. It took me awhile to warm up to 12-Step mostly because it seemed so cornball. Sit around with a bunch of derelicts and believe in a Higher Power and you will stop drinking. Ridiculous! But I had nowhere else to go - I went to meetings. At first it went in one ear and out the others, but then I began to listen and hear. Then I started to read the 12-Step literature and there were just enough Bible excerpts that I got curious. I read the NT, which I had been carrying in my shoulder bag for years in the form of a miniature Gideon's Bible that I'd picked up one day while sitting in the sun on the Columbia University Campus.

What I read resonated in a way I'd never experienced before then. All of the miracles seemed reasonable to me. Examples of what a compassionate person would do given the opportunity and the ability. The sermons and parables spoke of feelings, experiences and realizations that were manifestly right and true. Above all I came to understand that while I might think that I had failed the test of life, God had never given up on me - had in fact saved my life many times, and loved me, even as I had come to hate myself. I was being given a Second Chance - all I had to do was surrender to faith and take it. I did. That was when I entered the New Country.

*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.*

That is how I felt about Jesus. I had never met or heard about a person who I was willing to follow. I had met people who I admired - people who inspired me. But none of them could have counted me as a follower. I was not convinced that any of them knew more than I did about the life of the spirit. All that changed when I met Jesus of Nazareth. For me, every parable, every story and every action was consistent and plausible. Ideas that I had heard many times before - were elevated and refreshed - given new credibility by the sacrifice Jesus made on our behalf.

My life was transformed irrevocably and in time I heard the Voice of God calling me to service as a Minister of Word and Sacrament. Something so far from my previous life that it had not even been on my long-range radar.

We all know what Jesus stands for. It doesn't matter if you are Christian, Buddhist, Muslim or Atheist - you know what Jesus stands for.

Jesus stands for what is Good. Justice, compassion, empathy for those who suffer, fairness, inclusion, human dignity and human potential. *Do unto others and you would have others do unto you.* Whoever you are, wherever you are - you know this.

*Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*

We believe in The God of Our Understanding and that is why we can look toward the future with Hope. Why we will not succumb to the Temptation to be consumed by doubt and fear.

*The second is like unto it - You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

This Second Commandment is where faith gets translated into action. If we follow this - truly follow it with all that it applies - then everything we say or do will get filtered through the lens of faith. We will be able to judge ourselves and others according to how well or how poorly this principle is being applied. Most importantly it prevents us from dividing human beings into Us and Them - objectifying others so that they no longer seem worth caring about.

*I will love my neighbor as myself.*

That's it. The whole message of The Christ. It applies not just to the human beings who happen to live next door, but to everything and everyone! If we do that - truly live by it - and then - if we can get others thinking that way - then I think perhaps we will have a future!

And all God's People did say...