

Being a good neighbour

10 November 2024

INTRODUCING TODAY'S THEME

There's plenty of people struggling to get by at the moment in our community.

This might be because they're unemployed or a single person or living with a disability or just finding that prices are going up faster than their income.

What might we do to help these people?

What do we learn from Jesus? Fed the hungry, healed the sick, ate with them ...

When the challenge seems so immense, what can we do?

BIBLE READINGS

Your word, O Lord, is a lamp for our feet,
and a light to our path.

[Ruth 2:1-23](#)

Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, a man of standing from the clan of Elimelek, whose name was Boaz.

Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, 'Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favour.'

Naomi said to her, 'Go ahead, my daughter.' So Ruth went, entered a field and began to glean behind the harvesters. As it turned out, she was working in a field belonging to Boaz. Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem and greeted the harvesters. He asked the overseer of his harvesters, 'Who does that young woman belong to?'

The overseer replied, 'She is the Moabite who came back from Moab with Naomi. She said, "Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters." She came into the field and has remained here from morning till now.'

Boaz said to Ruth, 'Listen to me. Don't go and glean in another field and don't go away from here. Stay here with the women who work for me. Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along after the women. I have told the men not to lay a hand on you. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled.'

At this, Ruth asked him, 'Why have I found such favour in your eyes that you notice me – a foreigner?'

Boaz replied, 'I've been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband – how you left your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.'

At mealtime Boaz said to her, 'Come over here. Have some bread and dip it in the wine vinegar.' When she sat down with the harvesters, he offered her some roasted grain. She ate all she wanted and had some left over.

So Ruth gleaned in the field until evening. Then she threshed the barley she had gathered, and it amounted to about an ephah, that is about ten kilograms. She carried it back to town, and Naomi saw how much she had gathered. Naomi asked her, 'Where did you glean today? Where did you work? Blessed be the man who took notice of you!' Then Ruth told Naomi about where she had been working. 'The name of the man I worked with today is Boaz,' she said.

'The Lord bless him!' Naomi said to Ruth. 'He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead.' She added, 'That man is our close relative; he is one of our guardian-redeemers.'

Then Ruth said, 'He even said to me, "Stay with my workers until they finish harvesting all my grain."'

Naomi said to Ruth, 'It will be good for you, my daughter, to go with the women who work for him, because in someone else's field you might be harmed.'

So Ruth stayed close to the women of Boaz to glean until the barley and wheat harvests were finished. And she lived with her mother-in-law.

[Mark 12:41-44](#)

Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents.

Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything - all she had to live on.'

Lord, may your word live in us
and bear much fruit to your glory.

MESSAGE Being a good neighbour

Vulnerability comes in many guises.

It may be medical conditions that afflict us.

It may be our age or gender.

It may be our economic situation and level of income.



Vulnerability may also arise from our social position, whether we are a single parent, or a recently arrived immigrant or refugee, or an indigenous person.



In the era of the OT, it was a male dominated world and women relied on men to provide a home and reputation for them.

Widows were especially vulnerable, and reliant on the generosity of others, especially male heirs or relatives.

The Hebrew word for widow (*almanah*) literally means one who is silenced or bound and thus unable to speak and unable to advocate on their own behalf – completely at the whim and mercy of others.



For Ruth, her situation is even worse. She is a female and a widow and also a foreigner, without any hope of support from male relatives. She has no power or agency and is completely at the mercy – or exploitation – of others.

Most of us don't know what it's like to be so utterly powerless.

Most of us are white and speak English and are fairly comfortable financially.

There is also a social safety net provided by the government.

But if you are a woman immigrant and come from a conservative and patriarchal cultural background, you may have very little social or financial power.

Perhaps the closest I have experienced to Ruth's powerlessness was visiting the African country of Malawi where my white skin labelled me as an outsider, where I didn't speak the language and where I was completely reliant on the support of others.

As widows, Naomi and Ruth have to be both shrewd and courageous, in order to survive in a man's world.

They arrive in Bethlehem at a good time, however, at the start of the barley harvest – for the OT law of gleaning was one way of ensuring that the poor received a small share of the harvest:

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your crop. ... Rather you shall leave them for the poor and the alien. (Lev 19:9-10)

This law comes in the same chapter that speaks of loving your neighbour, which as we heard last week, Jesus quoted as the most important commandment of the law along with loving God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.

So one way that Ruth and Naomi can support themselves is by gleaning the harvest, gathering up the grain that is spilt or left behind by the harvesters.

Ruth goes to the grain fields to glean.



As it happens, Ruth finds herself in the field belonging to Boaz, who happens to be a relative of Elimelech, Naomi's now dead husband, and who happens to also be a wealthy and prominent man in Bethlehem.

Is all this just a happy coincidence?

The language suggests that there is more going on here ... that God is at work behind the scenes, guiding Ruth to this particular field owned by this particular man.

And who should arrive from town at just the right moment but Boaz himself ...

One of his first questions is ...

'Who is that young woman? Who is she related to?'

When Boaz learns that the woman is the Moabite who came back with Naomi, he takes an interest in her welfare and demonstrates practical kindness – she is allowed access to the drinking water, to food at lunchtime and to protection from the male workers.



In the Lord's Prayer, we pray that God may provide our daily bread, our daily needs.

How does God do this?

It may be that we can earn an income to provide for our own daily needs.

Or it may be someone else generously provides what we need – in our country most likely through a pension or other government support.

Or it could be through a generous relative or neighbour.

Boaz combines these approaches.

He acts with kindness and generosity towards Ruth, but also allows her the dignity of working to provide for herself and Naomi through the practice of gleaning.

So although God does not directly supply Ruth's needs, the writer of the story sees God operating in the background to put all the right people and opportunities together. *It just so happened ...*

Ruth asks Boaz why he should be kind to her – as she is a foreigner.

Boaz responds by saying that he's heard about Ruth's story ... how she has remained loyal to Naomi, how she has supported Naomi, and the courage she has shown coming to a foreign land and putting her trust in Israel's God, under whose wings she has now come for refuge.



Boaz is acting as a generous neighbour but goes beyond what is required in the gleaning laws by asking the workers to deliberately pull out some of the grain stalks from the collected harvest for Ruth to pick up.

So Naomi and Ruth have enough food to survive, for now.

Their lives are still precarious though.

They have no long-term security and need a plan to prompt Boaz to act for them as a guardian-redeemer, a relative who will effectively adopt them into his family. We'll see how the possible plan develops next week.

Spoilers ... it involves courage, trust and decency to work and there is much that could go horribly wrong ... but that's for next week.

Two lessons emerge from this central part of the story.

First is the value of kindness and generosity, sharing the blessings we have received.

These are two characteristics of being a loving neighbour.

In our story, Boaz demonstrates both kindness and generosity. We might even say that

he shows grace to Ruth as a foreigner, treating her as well or better than any of the local women.

In our other reading today from Mark's Gospel, there is another sort of generosity on show.

Another widow, unnamed in the story, is visiting the temple in Jerusalem to worship God. Her life is also precarious one assumes. Yet according to Jesus, her small offering is extravagantly generous, giving all she has to live on.



The other side to her generosity of course is trust, trust that if we are generous, God will provide for us. This is the same message that Paul tells the church in Corinth. Live generously and trust that God will supply all you need.

The second lesson is that God is at work in our everyday lives

if we have the eyes of faith to see it.

Ruth just happens to visit the field of Boaz, who happens to just be arriving from Bethlehem.

He happens to be a generous and compassionate person who blesses Ruth.

He also happens to be in a position to help Naomi and Ruth towards a more secure future.



God blesses us every day in so many ways yet we often don't notice or pause to be thankful. A good spiritual practice is to spend a few minutes at the end of each day naming what we are thankful for. You might like to write one thing down for each day.

