

## Sundays between 30 Oct and 5 Nov, 31<sup>st</sup> in Ordinary Time, Year B

We are now in 'Ordinary Time' – that time of the Christian Year when (so we might believe) nothing extra-ordinary happens. Is it time for God's summer break? Or ours? In fact it's neither, of course.

Being in Ordinary Time means that we have both Continuous and Related Old Testament readings. (The Common Worship Lectionary works a little differently here. This Sunday is known as the Fourth before Advent, and the *Continuous* series of OT readings is dropped, which means that the reading from Ruth – for example – is not prescribed for morning worship according to CW)

### OT Continuous

#### Ruth 1:1-18

The book of Ruth is tiny, sandwiched (in our bibles) between great sagas of the beginnings of the Jewish state. It tells of a Bethlehemite, Elimelech, and his wife Naomi, who went into a foreign land (Moab) as refugees from famine. (What price the land flowing with milk and honey, we may ask?)

Their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion have very interesting names. *Mahlon* is reminiscent (in Hebrew) of the disease that struck the Egyptian firstborn in the book of Exodus, while *Chilion* means 'perishing' or 'sickly'. These names may point to an allegorical feature of the story, or else simply that their very sickness underscores the state of destitution to which the inhabitants of the Bethlehem region had fallen. Don't forget that *Bethlehem* means *house of bread*.

Settled in Moab the two young men marry, but their marital bliss is short-lived, leaving Ruth and Orpah – and of course Naomi herself – as widows in a culture where, without male protection, they (especially Naomi as a foreigner) would be highly vulnerable to exploitation.

Look closely at the dynamics of verses 8-14. Naomi decides that Orpah and Ruth would fare better without the encumbrance of an elderly foreigner mother-in-law. She plans to return to her homeland. At first both of the younger women are minded to go with her, but practical considerations persuade Orpah to change her mind. (Notice the principle of levirate marriage coming in here; as widows Ruth and Orpah might hope to marry a brother-in-law, both for personal security and for the possibility of children. But Naomi has no other sons, and is too old to hope for any.) Ruth, however, remains faithful to her mother-in-law; with a moving speech she pledges her allegiance to Naomi.

Here, then, are laid the foundations of Ruth's appearance in the genealogy of Jesus: see Matthew 1:5, and Luke 3:32. How interesting! Luke's gospel shows an unusual interest in the place of women in Jesus' circle, yet in his genealogy Ruth is not mentioned, just her (future) husband Boaz. Matthew, on the other hand, is happy to mention the mother as well as the father. Could this be due to the place of women in the inheritance of Jewish identity? Matthew was a Jew, Luke probably was not.

### Ps 146

We read this psalm just eight weeks ago! These are the notes I wrote for that Sunday.

As we have often found, the compilers of the lectionary light upon readings that mirror one another wonderfully. Here, in a call to the people to praise God we hear snorts of disdain towards princes (verses 2 & 3). (Read it like this: there is no help in *them*.) Then there is a long series of declarations of the Lord's actions (note: actions, not merely promises) which set out God's values. There is little point in celebrating a God who gives justice, looses the bound, lifts up those who are bowed down, etc. (verses 5-9), if the community does not follow suit in its life and practice.

Reflect on the place of this psalm in this Sunday's readings. Could it be linked with the story of Ruth (who will again have our attention next week)? Could it be a reminder of God's values, so clearly set out in Deuteronomy and in today's Gospel?

## **OT Related**

### **Deut 6:1-9**

On the edge of the Land of Promise, 'Moses' reminds God's people of the promise of God, and the demand of God. In the first paragraph the people's faithfulness is linked to their long-term well-being in the land they are about to enter. So, this promise is a qualified one; there is the possibility of 'losing it' through neglect of their founding principles.

It has been suggested (strongly) that in its present form this narrative and this speech may have been composed much later, in order to recover for the people of God precisely those founding principles whose loss (it was believed) had caused the anguish and catastrophe of the Exile. Maybe we are not able to resolve such issues one way or the other – certainly not without the help of biblical scholars.

Throughout this book the theme of faithful obedience runs like a strong current; and it has to be meticulous, minute, scrupulous obedience, deviating neither to the right nor to the left. When a community is under threat (as God's people were during and after the Exile) there is a strong tendency to withdraw behind barricades, insisting that the true faith can be sustained only by unswerving devotion to its ethical and religious principles, no matter how bad the fit might be between those principles and the ethos of the communities around. It is worth pondering where the Christian church now stands in the West, between on the one hand a form of hedonistic secularist culture, and on the other resurgent and socially conservative Islam.

The second paragraph digs the footings on which all these principles are to be erected – monotheism. Here, certainly, is a principle on which Christians Jews and Muslims stand shoulder-to-shoulder: there is only one God. For all these Abrahamic faiths, there is the challenge of working what this monotheism means in practice. And for the Christian community there is a further challenge: how do we reconcile our distinctive claim to believe in God the Holy Trinity with our claim to share in the radical monotheism of our Jewish and Muslim cousins?

### **Ps 119:1-8**

Psalm 119 is by far the longest in the psalter. It is based on an acrostic: each stanza of eight lines begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet. No doubt this binds the psalm to the language in which it was originally written, as well as serving as a mnemonic (reminder) for believers who wish to commit the psalms to memory.

The theme of the psalm is the riches to be found in God's word, and the fulfilment to be found in keeping God's commands (see the Deuteronomy reading above). This stanza sets out the stall very clearly.

### **Epistle Hebr 9:11-14**

For several weeks now we have been following this writer's arguments about the superiority of Christ's priesthood to that set out in the Torah and the traditions stemming from it. Here 'the Holy Place' is used as a metaphor for Christ's willingness to suffer as a consequence of his determination not to deviate (either to the right or to the left) from the way of acceptance and love on which he was set by his Father and ours.

The concern of the writer focusses upon our conscience, tangled as it is by 'dead works'. Are these simply the wrong things we have done in our lifetime? Or are they the good things through which we have tried to secure our inner peace?

### **Gospel: Mark 12:28-34**

This conversation situates Jesus firmly in the Deuteronomic tradition – at least in the footings upon which its founding principles are built. Jesus recites the Shema, *Hear, O Israel*. And it strengthens the nuance with which the bare decoration of faith has been passed down. Not 'you shall believe in ...' but 'you shall love...'. Jesus also adds 'and your neighbour as yourself', which prompts deep reflection upon our own lifestyle choices.

Perhaps the characteristic feature of Jesus' relationship with the ancient Hebrew traditions was that of critical friend. He did not disavow the Torah, but he did criticise the way it was being applied with such demanding rigour. Always his aim seems to have been to ground faith in relationship with God – you shall *love*... When Jesus talks about this puritanical style of faithful obedience, he points out that if a person commits himself or herself to such a pattern he (or of course she) is in effect renouncing any claim upon God's grace; instead such believers are pinning their hopes on their own attention to detail in matters of the Law. Such an approach may tame the will, but it is not the way to lead the heart.