Sermon for 31st in Ordinary Year B

Readings: Ruth 1:1-18; Hebrews 9:11-14; Mark 12:28-34

i

Naomi was an economic refugee. She had fled from the famine ravaging Bethlehem with her husband and two sons. They had taken refuge in the neighbouring country of Moab – a long time enemy of Israel and Judah. Whilst in exile, Naomi’s sons and husband die. This leaves Naomi in the most desperate position imaginable – a widow with no male relatives, far from home in a hostile country. It would be hard to imagine a more desperate situation for a woman in that society.

So Naomi decides she has to return home and seek the assistance of a male relative, but when she is about to leave, one of her daughter’s-in –law, Ruth, insists on going with Naomi. Ruth is going to face the same dangers as Naomi is fleeing. Ruth is a Moabite, with no male relatives in Judah except through her deceased husband. She cannot be assured of any kind of welcome in her new home.

Convention dictated she should have stayed with her father and eventually remarried there, but she has become devoted to Naomi and has been converted to her husband’s religion. So Naomi’s God is now her God and she is prepared to risk everything by going with Naomi to the land of her new faith.

Ruth’s story reminds us that conversion comes with a price for many people. It is still true today that countries where Christianity is repressed are often the countries where the art of conversion has not been lost. In such countries, conversion matters because it can cost you your life, your freedom, your home and family. I don’t have to start listing those countries where that is still the case.

Only in the secular West, where freedom of religion is enshrined in law, does conversion appear to be an inconsequential, private and dying practice. I wonder if that would ever change if we lost those freedoms we so take for granted.

ii

Ruth’s story has a wider context than we might suppose.

The story relates events of perhaps a century before King David was born, because Ruth is David’s great-grand-mother. However, scholars tend to believe that the actual story was written much later than the events of which it tells.

If they are right, *Ruth* is one of those post-exilic books written, alongside the story of *Jonah*, to oppose the prevailing political and religious mood of the day when Ezra-Nehemiah reforms after the Exile introduced a narrowly nationalistic view of salvation, which resulted in the Samaritans being driven out of Jerusalem to Mount Gerizim (John 4:20) and many mixed marriages being dissolved – putting many divorced Samaritan women in a real predicament.

Those who opposed the ethnic narrowness of the Ezra-Nehemiah period looked back fondly to the zenith of Jewish internationalism and understanding of their role in God’s global plan of salvation which was voiced in Exile by Isaiah of Babylon.

The story of *Ruth,* in such a context of heightened racial tensions, makes the telling point that even mighty King David had Moabite blood in him.

Conventions, rules, and by implication the Law as interpreted by Ezra and the priestly- legal school after the Exile, which impede the possibility of such love of God spreading across the world to which Ruth’s faith testifies must inherently be contrary to God’s purpose. This is the message the story of Ruth wants to communicate to the powers that be behind the Ezra-Nehemiah reforms.

iii

Our gospel passage today from Mark 12:28-34 tells a similar tale to that of Ruth.

In this passage a lawyer takes on Jesus as the last in line of all the various opponents of Jesus who each after the other confront Jesus with their best arguments and are each in turn outwitted.

The lawyer has witnessed the impressive nature of Jesus’s responses to the various challenges, so when he takes Jesus on to question him about which is the greatest commandment, his question comes across as less of yet another attempted entrapment and more of a genuine question, asked in admiration.

Whether intended as a genuine question or not, the lawyer receives the conventional religious answer when Jesus cites the Jewish daily prayer, the *Schema,* from Deuteronomy 6 (the alternative OT reading today).

Yet at that very moment it was as if the penny dropped, or the scales fell from his eyes, or his heart was suddenly warmed – choose what metaphor you will – but in that moment the lawyer suddenly sees what Jesus is all about. He suddenly grasps why Jesus has cleansed the temple and said what he has said about the authorities.

Love of God and love of neighbour are “more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices” (v33).

“You are not far from the kingdom,” replies Jesus. This is precisely the point of Jesus’ protests against the prevailing priorities of Judaism of his day. They were still as ethnically narrow, as politically nationalistic, as exclusively minded as Ezra and Nehemiah.

Jesus has come to open the floodgates once and for all to the unrestricted, uncontrollable outpouring of God’s love. This opening up of God’s loving presence is symbolised in the tearing of the curtain in the temple when Jesus dies upon the cross. No one can use God’s Law to withhold God’s love from gentiles, prostitutes, tax collectors, the crippled, lepers, soldiers, fishermen and shepherds and sundry others deemed beyond the pale by the religious authorities.

So our gospel reading presents us with a second tale of conversion today. The lawyer is effectively converted from the ranks of those trying to ensnare Jesus to those who are not far from the kingdom.

The lesson is one for us to heed today also.

Ezra and Nehemiah are alive and well in all sorts of inward-looking exclusive groups who claim they alone have the key to salvation. But it is not just fringe religious sects that do this; we can all set up barriers of our own, sometimes unconsciously, sometimes believing we are being faithful to the gospel. The Church has an unhappy history of ex-communicating other Christians for perceived short-comings.

We have at times failed to learn the lesson of the woman taken in adultery in John 8:1-11 who was not condemned to death by Jesus for breaking the Commandment, but was nevertheless told to go and sin no more. Too often we have appeared to reject the person as well as the action.

Sometimes our piety has become a barrier to others finding God among us, rather than our transformed lives acting as a signpost of God’s presence in the Church. Sadly, the Church has at times been the barrier rather than the gateway to the Kingdom that it was created to be – in the same way as the Law, temple, priests, lawyers, and the sacrifices and burnt offerings of Jerusalem became a dam holding back God’s love for the world, rather than being its conduit into the world.

The sacrifices and burnt offerings had done as much as they could. They had served to convey God’s willingness to forgive transgressions, as well as convey the heavy price in blood required to find such forgiveness. But now Jesus was to become the one true, eternal sacrifice, the one whose blood alone has obtained ‘eternal redemption’ (Hebrews 9:12).

So we must ask ourselves today what are the things we do that serve to narrow or restrict God’s love? What are we doing that impedes the love of God in Christ from going to the ends of the earth? Who, for us, is Moabite, the one from beyond the pale, yet surprisingly asking to be allowed in?

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