

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17

^{3:1} Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you. ² Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. ³ Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. ⁴ When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do." ⁵ She said to her, "All that you tell me I will do." ^{4:13} So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the LORD made her conceive, and she bore a son. ¹⁴ Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! ¹⁵ He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him." ¹⁶ Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. ¹⁷ The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.

Commentary

Naomi came back to Bethlehem after more than ten years in Moab, a sojourn that robbed her of her husband and her two sons. She told the women of Bethlehem that she "went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty" (1:21). As widows, she and her daughter-in-law Ruth, a Moabite, had no means of support except begging and gleaning. There were kinsmen who should have assumed responsibility for Naomi and Ruth's care according to inheritance laws of the time (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). In a custom called levirate marriage, the brother of a dead man was supposed to marry the widow who would conceive a son to carry on the family name and hold the family property. Naomi seemed to have some version of this law in mind when she sent Ruth to the threshing floor at night to gain the attention of Boaz. The women of Bethlehem who first heard Naomi's lament upon her return narrated her reversal of fortune, saying that Ruth's love and loyalty were worth "more...than seven sons" (4:15). Naomi's laments and scheming had been answered by God's acts of kindness (hesed) from Ruth, Boaz, and ultimately from God.

Reflection

Where is God at work in this story—according to Naomi? The narrator? Your own view? What is the relationship between human planning and God's action?

Hebrews 9:24-28

^{9:24} For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. ²⁵ Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; ²⁶ for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself. ²⁷ And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment, ²⁸ so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

Commentary

In the Old Testament, an offering of blood was used to inaugurate covenants and provide cleansing from sin. Though strange to modern readers, ancient people saw blood as equivalent to life. A blood offering was a substitute for one's whole life, which God, being God, had a right to demand. People dared not approach God without the blood substitute. In the view of Hebrews, Christ's offering of himself provided that blood sacrifice, making it possible for Christians to approach God without fear. Jews believed that the desert tabernacle (the "sanctuary made by human hands") was an early representation of a real heavenly sanctuary. The Greek philosopher Plato believed that the earthly, material world was but a shadow of the real world of ideas and invisible substances. The author of Hebrews may have been trying to appeal to educated, Greek-speaking believers with this illusion to the Platonic understanding of reality.

Reflection

If we are holy and living sacrifices, what does God have a right to demand from you?

Mark 12:38-44

^{12:38} As he taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, ³⁹ and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! ⁴⁰ They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation." ⁴¹ He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴² A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. ⁴³ Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow

has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. ⁴⁴ For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

Commentary

This is a passage that focuses not only on the gifts of our material resources, but the ways in which we give of ourselves. Jesus' barbed words echoed Old Testament prophets such as Amos, Isaiah, and Micah, who condemned the wealthy who took advantage of the poor. Such prophets predicted the wrath of God upon corrupt leaders, even as Jesus predicted the coming of the Son of Man in judgment and glory. The scribes could expect "greater condemnation," Jesus said, because they used the name of God to mask what they were doing. This teaching, which took place in the Temple where Jesus had been disputing with various religious leaders since arriving in Jerusalem, was scathing. Jesus impugned their character and their motives, implying that all scribes were alike. Having issued similar warnings about the Pharisees and Herodians, Jesus seems to have burned all his bridges in relation to these leaders. Yet "the large crowd was listening to him with delight" (12:37b). These words of Jesus were recalled by Mark when he wrote his Gospel during the time Christians found it necessary to separate themselves from Jewish traditions and practices. Jesus also told the story of the widow—this story anticipates the Passion, in which Jesus would give up "his whole life."

Reflection

They gave out of their surplus; she gave her all. Reflect on your giving practices in light of this comparison.

Responsive Psalter

Psalm 42

- ^{42:1} As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.
- ² **My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
When shall I come and behold
the face of God?**
- ³ My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me continually,
"Where is your God?"
- ⁴ **These things I remember,
as I pour out my soul:
how I went with the throng,
and led them in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,
a multitude keeping festival.**

⁵ Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
⁶ **my help and my God.**

My soul is cast down within me;
therefore I remember you
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,
from Mount Mizar.

⁷ **Deep calls to deep**
at the thunder of your cataracts;
all your waves and your billows
have gone over me.

⁸ By day the LORD commands his steadfast love,
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.

⁹ **I say to God, my rock,**
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I walk about mournfully
because the enemy oppresses me?”

¹⁰ As with a deadly wound in my body,
my adversaries taunt me,
while they say to me continually,
“Where is your God?”

¹¹ Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.

Closing Prayer

Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.