

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 1:1-18

^{1:1} In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. ² The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. ³ But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴ These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, ⁵ both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband. ⁶ Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had considered his people and given them food. ⁷ So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. ⁸ But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me." ⁹ The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband." Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. ¹⁰ They said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." ¹¹ But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands?" ¹² Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, ¹³ would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has turned against me." ¹⁴ Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. ¹⁵ So she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." ¹⁶ But Ruth said, "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. ¹⁷ Where you die, I will die-- there will I be buried. May the LORD do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!" ¹⁸ When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

Commentary

Ruth insisted on returning with Naomi, declaring that she would thenceforth adopt Naomi's home, people, and God as her own. As the story later unfolded, Ruth would help secure Naomi's future and continue the family line, giving birth to son who would become the grandfather of King David. A foreigner's faithfulness would help preserve the people of Israel, and the writer of the Book of Ruth is suggesting that Ruth's steadfast love for Naomi parallels God's steadfast love for Israel.

Reflection

When have you seen the love of God demonstrated in faithful love between human beings? How do you express God's love to strangers?

Hebrews 9:11-14

^{9:11} But when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), ¹² he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. ¹³ For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, ¹⁴ how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God.

Commentary

The Hebrews lections we are currently considering are indeed difficult. Intense and closely reasoned, full of strange customs, these passages assume the sacrificial practices associated with the desert tabernacle of Moses (Leviticus 16). On the annual day of Atonement, the high priest went alone to the innermost sanctuary (the Holy of Holies) of the tabernacle to offer sacrifices to expiate the sins of the people. He sprinkled blood of a goat and bull on the mercy seat (a slab of gold on top of the ark of the covenant) to effect forgiveness of sin. The author compares Jesus to this Jewish high priest, arguing that His self-sacrifice on the cross was far superior an action to cleanse our sins.

Reflection

How do you gain assurance that your sins are forgiven—by confession during worship, or another setting? By baptism? During Holy Communion? In your private prayer time?

Mark 12:28-34

^{12:28} One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" ²⁹ Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰ you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' ³¹ The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." ³² Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; ³³ and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,' --this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." ³⁴ When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask him any question.

Commentary

A famous rabbi, Hillel (35 BC), said, "What you yourself hate, do not do to your fellow; this is the whole law; the rest is commentary." Jesus offered no new answer to the scribe's question. He spoke what every Jew already knew, the *Shema*: "Hear, O Israel, YHWH is your God, YHWH alone"—the first words of the instruction given to the people by Moses at Mount Horeb after the Ten Commandments. Pious Jews recited the *Shema* twice daily and taught it to their children. On this commandment Jesus and his orthodox opponents would have been in complete agreement: God alone could command human love and obedience.

Reflection

The rabbis tried to state the whole law in a few basic principles. What would you say is the essence of the biblical message? How would you summarize God's commands?

Responsive Reading

Psalm 146

- ^{146:1} Praise the LORD!
Praise the LORD, O my soul!
- ² **I will praise the LORD as long as I live;
I will sing praises to my God all my life long.**
- ³ Do not put your trust in princes,
in mortals, in whom there is no help.
- ⁴ **When their breath departs, they return to the earth;
on that very day their plans perish.**
- ⁵ Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the LORD their God,
- ⁶ who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them;

who keeps faith forever;
7 **who executes justice for the oppressed;**
who gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets the prisoners free;
8 **the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.**
The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;
the LORD loves the righteous.
9 The LORD watches over the strangers;
he upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.
10 The LORD will reign forever,
your God, O Zion, for all generations.
Praise the LORD!

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.