

SACRIFICE AND REDEMPTION

Pentecost 25 Year B

Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17; Ps. 127; Heb. 9:24-28; Mk. 12:38-44

Gladstone 11/11/2018

Once upon a time, a pig and a chicken were walking down the road. As they walked along, they came upon a prominent church, which had a sign out the front advertising a Garage Sale and Breakfast, which was going to be held in a few days.

At the bottom of the sign the menu was given, it read "Bacon and eggs will be served from 6:30 to 8:00 am." The chicken turned to the pig and said, "See! Even we can help the work of the church!"

"Yes," said the pig, "but yours is only a contribution, mine is a sacrifice."

In our relationship with the church and perhaps in other areas of our lives, we usually don't mind making donations—sometimes very generous donations. We give out of our abundance gladly, but when it comes to real sacrifice—well, that's another story.

I suppose it's our own fault, really. We preach that since Christ has come to make the one and only sacrifice necessary for our salvation, we no longer have to make sacrifices—no longer have to strive for perfection—no longer have to appease God through some ritual or other. And that's true. But that doesn't mean that we shouldn't offer God anything less than our all—and that requires sacrifice.

One evening at a prayer meeting the preacher invited people to give testimony to their faith. A man in the front row stood up and told this story. "Many years ago I fell on very hard times. I lost my job. My wife divorced me. I was out on the street with nowhere to live. In desperation I walked into a church and sat down and prayed. Then I took the very last dollar I had and put it in the offering. Penniless, I walked outside, only to run into an old friend of mine, who took pity on me and offered me a job with his company. I accepted it, became successful, and now I am a millionaire. All of this happened because of that night long ago when I put all the money I had in the offering at church."

When the man finished his story, the congregation was deeply moved and sat in silence for a while. Then a woman in the back row stood up and said to the man, "I dare you to do it again right now."

This morning I want to talk to you about two women—two women who are noted for their devotion and sacrifice—two women who gave up all they had because of their devotion to another. The first is the story of Ruth—a story that has been termed by one commentator as, *The Romance of Redemption*—a beautiful story of one woman's devotion to her mother-in-law and the sacrifice she made because of that devotion. We had a close look at that last week. The second is the story of the poor widow, recorded in the gospel according to Mark, who placed all she had in the offering plate at the temple.

Both of these women share something in common—something that witnesses to us something of the nature of sacrifice and as a consequence, something of the gospel of Christ. Both of these stories go beyond the simple narrative story—for they point to a truth that is much more foundational to our faith, than mere sacrifice.

RUTH AND BOAZ

The book of Ruth is a literary masterpiece—even by today’s standards. It’s a beautiful story of a touching romance. I wonder how it would be featured in one of those Mills and Boon novels. Perhaps its title would be something like, *How one woman found happiness—in the arms of a second husband*. It’s a book that excites the imagination, because all through it, is entwined the captivating theme of love and romance—and we all like a good romance with a “happy ever after”—don’t we?

Although it’s a beautiful story in itself, it’s the story behind the story—its meaning and significance—that is simply fascinating. The book of Ruth is one of those beautiful Old Testament pictures that’s designed by God himself to illustrate the dramatic truths of the Christian faith that we find expounded in the New Testament.

But just who is this woman, Ruth? Well, for those of you who were here last Sunday, you probably have a pretty good idea of who she was already—and some of her story. From the reading from the book of Ruth today, we can ascertain a number of significant things—all of which place her at a distinct disadvantage, from a Hebrew’s perspective.

She was a woman—and not only that, she was a foreign woman, and had been an idolater to boot. She was a widow and having now moved with her mother-in-law, Naomi, to Israel, had no prospects of further marriage or children. Consequently, she was somewhat of an outcast of society. All that she could hope for was being able to glean enough grain from the fields to keep her and her mother-in-law alive—not much to look forward to.

Yet in spite of all that was stacked up against her, God chose her to be part of his plan of redemption. Through her sacrifice—to move away from her own people, because of her love for Naomi—she became one of the central figures of the Old Testament. Central because God chose her to be the grandmother of one of the greatest people of the Old Testament—King David—through whom, a little bit later, the Messiah would come.

THE WIDOW

In today’s gospel account, the story is told of a poor widow who put two small copper coins in the temple treasury. It too is a story of sacrifice, and preachers have often used this woman to talk about stewardship in the church. But the story goes much deeper than that. And again, who is this woman, of whom Jesus speaks so highly.

Well, she was a widow, old and poor. In those days a widow was in a unique position in Jewish society. She had no rights of inheritance at all. She could not own property. She could not have an income-producing job. She had no means of support whatever. Becoming a widow was the fate most dreaded by a woman, for when her husband died,

she could either go back to her own family (if they would pay for her), or else she would have to stay with her husband's family where she was usually given low and demeaning work to do because she was an extra burden on them.

The widow in today's gospel is obviously poor. She is probably wearing dirty, tattered clothing. No doubt she spent time sitting by the roadside waiting for people passing by to give her handouts. Her whole life depends on the charity of others. She has nothing else on which she can rely.

Nevertheless, this widow comes to the temple and puts, not one, but two coins in the offering. They are small coins, to be sure, the smallest coins available. It would take two or three of them to make one cent. You can't buy anything at all with only these two coins. Now she could have put just one coin in the offering and keep one for herself but she doesn't. She puts in both of them. In other words, she offers everything she has. There is nothing left. That's it—there is no more.

In today's gospel reading, we find Jesus somewhere off to the side watching all this happen. He sees rich people put large sums in the offering, and he sees this poor widow put in her two small coins. Then he comments to his disciples about the sharp contrast between the offering of the rich and the offering of this widow.

What is it that concerns Jesus in all of this? Is he worried about the cash flow of the temple? Is he conducting an audit or perhaps doing a spot check to make sure people are paying their tithes?

No, what concerns Jesus appears in the original Greek text but not so much in the English translation. One crucial word is omitted in verse 41. The word is "how." Here is the way the text should read: "He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched *how* the crowd was putting money into the treasury." Jesus is not merely watching the people make their offering—he is watching *how* people make their offering. What this means is that Jesus is looking, not just at the amount of their offering, but the heart from which the offering is made. Other people are giving from their abundance—their excess of wealth—but this poor widow gives from her poverty. As a result, Jesus says, she gives far more than all the others.

Jesus concludes by saying that this widow has put in everything she had, all she had to live on. But that is only what the English translation says he said. In the Greek, Jesus' actual words are much more pointed. He says that the widow put in everything she had, her whole life. Her whole life! These words of Jesus are not accidental. In Mark's account of the gospel this scene is the last in Jesus' public ministry. This final teaching of Jesus points us towards his own passion and death on the cross. Out of her poverty and unseemliness, the widow gives her whole life to God without reservation—she has nothing left to call upon for her needs. Soon Jesus, out of his poverty and unseemliness, will also give his whole life to God without reservation.

CONCLUSION

Both these stories are about sacrifice, but they're also allegories of, not only how God has chosen the weak and insignificant things to profound the strong and wise, but that God's grace is a universal grace—one that extends to all. While the Hebrew people and more particularly the Pharisees, in the gospel story, were intent on maintaining their purity as God's chosen people, and were constantly protecting that right, God was busy choosing someone else.

Ruth was a gentile with no prospects, but in her sacrifice, God chose her to play a significant part in the redemption of humanity—not only through King David, but through his descendant, Jesus Christ. The story of Ruth is the story of redemption—our redemption—God's grace, poured out on all humankind—not just those who *think* they are important.

The widow who placed two small coins in the offering plate is also an illustration of the faith that is expressed through sacrifice. No doubt the Pharisees also saw what she put in the plate, and probably mumbled amongst themselves on the insignificance of her offering. Yet Jesus saw through to her heart—a heart that gave all for the sake of her God.

Like the Pharisees, we too can often get trapped in our own self-righteous mindset. We too can think that God needs us to fulfil his purpose here on earth—that we have arrived and that only we can experience God's grace and mercy. But God has other plans—includes other people—even those, whom we would reject.

It must be true, because, after all, God has chosen us—we who according to God's righteous judgement, should be condemned.

Once again, God has chosen the weak, the frail, the fragile, the insignificant, the idolater, the rebellious—in order to fulfil his plans for the future—our future. He has chosen us to be witnesses to his gospel.

The story of Ruth and Boaz is a touching romance that ends with the birth of Obed, King David's father. It's a story that points with hope to the future—to the Messiah. It's also one that shows up God's immeasurable love towards all of us. As our kinsman-redeemer, Christ has paid the price for our redemption—has sacrificed himself because of his love for us. Our response to this great mercy should not just be to make an offering out of our abundance, but, like the poor widow, to give not just all that we have, but all of ourselves as well—our total being.

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.