

Thought for the Day

Thought for the day is based on one of the day's lectionary readings.

For the Bible online, go to: <http://bible.oremus.org/>

Choose your version (we use NRSV in church)

Copy and paste the reference into the search box and the passage will be displayed.

4th January

Ruth chapter 3

I wonder if you have ever thought about how many women feature in the Bible and how many men? Or about how many of the women are named, compared to the male characters? I would guess that you could easily name a lot of men in the Bible from memory but with women you might get to - half a dozen? Statistically I am told that less than 8% of the characters named in the Bible are female.

This is partly because the writings that make up our scriptures came from cultural backgrounds which were largely patriarchal, where women had a subordinate and often even invisible role. This convention is challenged though in parts of Scripture with some outstanding female characters bucking the trend. Ruth is one of them.

Today's reading is unusual in the Bible as it is a book about women and named after one of main female characters, Ruth. Not only was she female but she was not an Israelite; she was from Moab but had married into an Israelite family.

If you're not too sure where to find the book of Ruth – perhaps that is interesting in itself! – it follows the book of Judges and the story takes place against the background of that historical period before Israel had kings. There are only 4 chapters so you could read the whole story through if you don't know it.

Basically, Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi, lose their male relatives, which leaves them very vulnerable and poor. They seek refuge with Boaz, their nearest next of kin, and Boaz fulfils his duty as next of kin according to the law, by taking Ruth as a wife so that she will be protected. He lives near Bethlehem; their child is Obed who becomes the grandfather of David, the great king.

Thus Ruth the Moabitess becomes a member of the family tree of Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah and Son of David.

It's a great story, a feel-good story, even though it starts with tragedy with the women bereaved, losing all their security and income, and having to live as beggars.

Ruth is loyal to Naomi when she could have abandoned her and gone back to her own people. The bond of love survives their personal tragedy. The kindness and care between the two women is very touching.

Boaz acts honourably and generously towards the two women who were entirely within his power.

He allows them to glean in the fields, ensuring that enough grain is left behind for them to live on.

His act of marrying Ruth is a redemptive and compassionate act; he saves or redeems the situation, and the fruit of their union shows how much God blesses them, as it leads to the birth of our great Redeemer, Jesus Christ.

When Matthew used the genealogy which opens his gospel, he included Ruth's name among Jesus' ancestors. That genealogy which covers 42 generations since Abraham, only

names 4 women other than Mary, if you include 'the wife of Uriah' whose name was Bathsheba.

It's a stylised account of antecedents but it serves to illustrate the purposes of God, spanning generations and time beyond the grasp of us short lived mortals. And Ruth, the foreigner, is named there. God has woven her into the story of salvation, bringing her courage and loyalty and faithfulness into the story. How amazed Ruth would have been if she could have known!

And how none of us know what the long-term consequences of our actions and decisions and our lives will be. Perhaps it is merciful that we can't see far ahead; I'm glad that this time last year I didn't know what was to come in 2020; yet sometimes when life seems meaningless and especially when suffering is great, we do ask what's it all for, where is it going, what good could ever come of this? And we may not see that, it may not be granted us to know. We have to just carry on doing the right thing, following as well as we can, the path of our Lord, living as best we can today, and trust to him for the outcomes.

*Keep us, good Lord, under the shadow of your mercy in this time of uncertainty and distress.
Sustain and support the anxious and fearful, and lift up all who are brought low;
that we may rejoice in your comfort,
knowing that nothing can separate us from your love
in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.*

