

## Service for Bible Month, 7<sup>th</sup> June 2020

Hello. My name is Tony Bell. I am a member of Wesley Church and a Methodist lay preacher

This morning I am leading the prayers and introducing the hymns and readings. The sermon will be preached by Rev Chris Evans.

First, a few words on the service. This service is the first in 'Bible Month' when a series of services focus on a particular book in the Bible. Bible Month is organized by the UK Methodist Church. This year, the book is the Old Testament book of Ruth.

Ruth might seem like a minor character in the story of Israel, but the short book with her name opens up many issues that are contemporary for us today, such as valuing people from outside the immediate community, fluidity and commitment in close relationships, and being strong where there is gender inequality.

The book of Ruth begins not with Ruth herself, but with Naomi who was to become Ruth's mother-in-law. Naomi and her husband Elimelek lived in Bethlehem. There was a famine. To find food they moved to the nearby country of Moab which at times fought wars with Israel.

Naomi and Elimelek had two sons, Mahlon and Kilion, who both married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. First Elimelek died, and then Mahlon and Kilion also died, leaving Naomi and her daughters-in-law in dire straits.

Naomi decided to move back to Bethlehem. After much indecision, Orpah chose to stay in Moab. Ruth instead attached herself to Naomi with the immortal words, 'Where you go, I will go. Where you stay, I will stay.'

The story develops to have significance far beyond the lives of Naomi and Ruth. After moving to Bethlehem, Ruth married Boaz. She had a son Obed who had a son Jesse who had a son called David. David was the greatest ever king of Israel, and Jesus was born of the line of David. So the great-grandmother of King David was not an Israelite, but a Moabite who knew loss and became a stranger in a strange land.

Amongst its many messages, the book of Ruth tells us that God breaks out of our expectations. People we might not expect become central to God's story.

God's story is not bound by time or place, and neither is his worship. Worship takes us into the presence of God in the company of people of all nations and of all times, including those who have passed before us.

At a time when we are unable to physically go to church, this reassures us that we are not separated from God or from each other. As we turn our thoughts to God, we are united as part of the great body of the faithful of all times and all places.

**Our first hymn** begins with the words ‘Holy, Holy, holy, Lord God almighty’.

The first verse takes us straight into the presence of God. And the second verse takes us into the presence of all the saints: ‘Holy, Holy, Holy, all the saints adore thee’.

**HYMN:** [Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God almighty \(StF11, H&P7\)](#)

O-O-O

### **PRAYERS OF ADORATION AND CONFESSION**

Like many people, I’m working at home during the lockdown. I work sitting at my dining room table looking out over my back garden in Lower Earley. I see the usual visitors: squirrels, pigeons and magpies, with red kites wheeling overhead. We’ve also had some less common visitors. Two foxes regularly sun themselves on the grass. A woodpecker pecks into the grass for food, and a tiny goldfinch hops around with striking red and yellow markings. As we stay indoors, the animals venture out, and we see more of a wonderful creation that at other times remains hidden.

#### **Let us worship God and thank him for his goodness:**

Lord, we have much to thank you for in these unusual times. We thank you for the beauty of nature that shines through as animals venture out with confidence. We thank you for the clear air free of pollution, the pure blue sky, the brightness of sunlight, the silence as city and traffic noises recede.

We thank you for pleasures that normally go unnoticed.

We thank you for a growing shared understanding of how much we depend on each other. And Lord, as we turn to the book of Ruth this morning, we are reminded that you welcome the stranger.

We thank you Lord for the assurance this gives us, since we sometimes make ourselves a stranger to you. We wander from your way of love, service and self-giving.

God’s generous love has been known down the ages by all who draw close, and so we can pray in the ancient words of Psalm 103, verses 8 to 22:

The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.

He will not always accuse, nor will he harbour his anger forever;

he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.

For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him;

as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.

The life of mortals is like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more.

But from everlasting to everlasting the Lord’s love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children’s children--- with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts.

The Lord has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all.

Praise the Lord, you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding, who obey his word.  
 Praise the Lord, all his heavenly hosts, you his servants who do his will.  
 Praise the Lord, all his works everywhere in his dominion.  
 Praise the Lord, my soul.

Jesus gave his followers a special prayer to say.  
 Let us now share in that prayer together:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name,  
 thy kingdom come, thy will be done on Earth as it is in heaven.  
 Give us this day our daily bread,  
 and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.  
 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.  
 For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen

O-O-O

Our next hymn was written by Isaac Watts. The first four verses sing the praise of God as creator. The final verse sings that this same creator God keeps watch over us.

**HYMN: [I sing the almighty power of God \(StF107, H&P334\)](#)**

O-O-O

## **THE WORD**

We now hear our Bible reading for today. As I mentioned earlier, this is the first of four services focusing on the book of Ruth. We will hear the first chapter of the book.

## **RUTH CHAPTER 1**

O-O-O

## **SERMON PREACHED BY REV CHRIS EVANS**

The days when the judges ruled were not Israel's best. In fact they were marked by a desperate cycle.

The people rebelled against God, disaster befell them, they cried out to him in prayer, and found he was faithful. He redeemed them and restored them, raised a ruler for them and protected them. And all went well until the people became proud and rebelled. Then disaster befell them, they cried out to him in prayer, and found he was faithful. He redeemed them and restored them, raised a ruler for them and protected them. And all went well until the people became proud and rebelled.

Round and round. Each generation repeating the mistakes of the past. As the book of Judges describes it: all did what they saw fit. Each man did what seemed good to him. No one obeyed God's rules but all did what they pleased. In this prehistoric post-modernity,

freedom became God, no-one could challenge another's behaviour, rebellion and disaster became normal.

One such disaster was the famine recorded in the first chapter of the book of Ruth. This famine forms the backdrop to the story of Naomi, who, with her husband Elimelech and two children, migrated across the Jordan the wrong way to Moab – remember all the effort God went to, to set his people free from slavery and land them safe on Canaan's side? Well, Elimelech and Naomi decide to reverse this redemption and run to Moab, a bitter enemy of Judah at the time.

And so, in the first five sentences in the book of Ruth we are introduced to Naomi and discover that disaster upon disaster befalls her.

First there's the famine in Bethlehem. It's not difficult to imagine how painful this must have been for a woman with two growing sons. Teenage boys can reduce their mothers to tears when the fridge is full, let alone when there's famine. But migrating to Moab would have been equally difficult. It's not easy of itself moving to a foreign land, but in a time of famine with other migrants desperately looking for work you can imagine how welcome Naomi and Elimelech might have been. You can almost imagine the 'hostile environment' strategy and the 'Go Home' billboard vans that Moabite politicians might have devised. Perhaps they complained about the strain the number coming from Judah were putting on public services, or stamped thousands of 'Go Home' clay tablets. Certainly, when Naomi's sons Mahlon and Kilion married Moabite girls, you can bet that at the working man's club there were grumbles about the pesky Judeans, 'stealing our jobs and taking our women ...'

If the famine was difficult and the migration as dangerous, Elimelech's death was disastrous for Naomi, and what's more, further tragedy befell her. Kilion and Mahlon both died too. And both were childless.

By verse 5 of Chapter 1, Naomi is a poor, foreign, childless widow.

Make no mistake, there is no worse situation to be in, in the ancient world. To be a poor, foreign, childless widow is a quadruple disadvantage. There is no more vulnerable human in ancient society than a poor, foreign, childless widow. Any one of those situations was perilous – which is why particular care is demanded for any one of this trio 11 times in the book of Deuteronomy alone.

Be sure of this. You don't get any lower at all than being a foreign, destitute, childless widow. And we've arrived at this point within five short verses in Ruth chapter 1. If the human species is actually governed solely by the Darwinian principle of the survival of the fittest, then Naomi deserves no more place in the world than the Dodo. Insufficiently adapted, Naomi ought to be no more than an appendix in our human history. She is the weakest link and she clings to the planet by her bitter fingernails.

But the Book of Ruth tells us that humans are not ultimately gene machines caused by some cosmic coincidence. No. Not at all. The human is a sacred thing, through whom,

with whom and in whom God's providence is at work. Even, or perhaps especially, the weak, the humble, the empty and the broken have a profound place in God's glorious plan. Even a bitter, broken, empty, impoverished, childless, foreign widow, in Moab, no less, has a place in God's story.

Don't you dare let people persuade you that life is meaningless, or that God doesn't care. Don't you dare ever treat a single one of his creatures as anything less than utterly sacred. Because if His power is woven into Naomi's story, there is no-one too far away from him, or too far gone to be a vessel for his glory. And please – don't give up on any moment in your life. For all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.

The first five verses of Ruth paint a picture of a creature living with disaster, with darkness and with despair, and the rest of the book tells us that, even in this state, God is still plotting good for us.

So. Two things. Firstly, please hear this chapter as an invitation to come home, and secondly as a challenge to live and love and trust a little like Ruth did.

Naomi left Bethlehem with a husband and two sons. With honour and with hope. By her own words she returns empty and she tells everyone they might as well call her bitter. She considers all that has happened and concludes that God has brought this misfortune to her – but still, she comes home to Bethlehem.

I imagine that the call home reached her through the whispered words of traders or travellers who came from Judah to Moab. Naomi heard, I imagine on the grape vine, that there was no longer famine in Judah and that in fact there was a plentiful harvest this year. And those words set in motion a journey that brought both Ruth and Naomi back to Bethlehem just as the barley harvest was beginning.

I don't know from where you hear whispers that say come home, I don't know how directly God has to address you for you to feel yourself called back towards him, but I am sure he calls you. 'Love only waits to forgive and forget, home, weary wanderer, home.' Romans 5 verse 8 tells that 'while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.' St Augustine puts it this way: 'Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee.' More recently, a man you'd never heard of until he was killed in America last week was filmed saying, 'This generation is lost, Come on home, Man ... because one day it's going to be just you and God.'

If you can't hear the barley harvest calling you back to the splendour of the Father, take it straight from Saint Paul. If you don't read the Bible, perhaps you'll hear Augustine. If not Augustine, perhaps George Floyd. Come on home, Man. God bids you come home. He calls you to come back from Moab to the land flowing with milk and honey. To come back across the Jordan. To come back from doing what seems good to you. Come back. Be near to him and nearer too.

I heard on the radio today about an experiment undertaken by an American professor. People were given Lego models to make and were paid a diminishing sum to make them. On average, people would build 11 models, with the price dropping from a starting point of four dollars, to an eventual sum of one dollar, before they stopped making the models. But a second group, given the same models, could only be bothered to make four before giving up. What was the difference between the two groups? The second group saw the models that they made taken apart in front of them, even whilst they made the next one. Fundamentally, we crave purpose; and life, with all its tasks and Lego models, however much gold you receive for the work you do, will never make sense until you realise your God-given purpose. You were made to enjoy God and bring him glory. Set your heart on this and cross the Jordan as many times as you need to, to make this purpose. Then you'll know joy that transcends tragedy, peace that never leaves you and goodness that transcends space and time.

When we know, however poor, or empty, or isolated, or busy, or stressed, or tired we are, that He made us for this wonderful purpose, then we know that the best is yet to come. For anyone who loves God this is a timeless truth. In Christ, the best is yet to come. The path to glory isn't straight, the path home isn't easy: narrow is the way that leads to life. We're not promised as followers that it all works out well – no, we're invited to take up our cross. But this book, the book of Ruth, tells us that our Father's promises are true. That providence is always at work and that his powerful purposes will not be undone. Even if you can't see it now, God's purposes are for the good and happiness of his people. In the worst of Israel's history, the period of the judges and in the land of their enemy, Moab, God was working in the tragedies of a single family to prepare the way for the greatest king of Israel.

Right now, God is at work for you. 'The ominous clouds are big with mercy and will break with blessing on your head.'

So Naomi made plans with her two daughters in law. She decided she would up sticks and move back home. She didn't expect them to come with her, and four times she instructs them to leave her. She says, 'Go back each of you to your mother's home ... Return home my daughters ... Return home my daughters ... Go back...'

They both stayed with her for part of the journey even after she insisted that they should go home. 'Look, I've got nothing for you,' she says. 'I'm too old to bear another son, you are best off returning to your own parents, to your own family and to your own kin. I can't provide for you in Bethlehem.' And eventually Orpah turns back.

But the book of Ruth exists because of the remarkable love of this young woman, Ruth, who is told all this by her mother in law and, though free to go home with dignity and honour, insists that she wants to follow her all the way to Bethlehem. Ruth is determined to do right by her mother in law whom she loves. She says, 'Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried.'

I'd like you to imagine a strange circumstance where, let's imagine, there is a virus, a pandemic that befalls human society, and you have to be separated from the society around you. Who would you choose to be in lockdown with? I'm not trying to provoke you to divorce, or wish yourself into a different family ... I'm just sure that, however wonderful your mother in law is, she wouldn't be your first choice for lockdown!

Ruth, basically, entirely voluntarily, self-isolates in a foreign land with her mother-in-law. I'm not sure you'll ever find a clearer picture of unconditional love! In fact, as she resolves to do this remarkable thing, she makes a preposterously strong oath, 'May the Lord deal with me be it ever so severely if anything but death separates you and me.' Or, 'May the LORD do so to me and more also if even death parts me from you.'

Now you'll not find that in your marriage vows, nor be asked to make such a declaration as a witness in court, but the formula is found four times in scripture. Ruth of Moab says it here. Jezebel of Sidon swears wrongly but in the same way that Elijah will die within the day. Ben Hadad, King of Samaria, swears wrongly with the same phrase; and finally, Ruth's great grandson Solomon mirrors Ruth's words. Two wise individuals swear by God Almighty that he may deal with them ever so severely if they don't do what is right. And two less wise make idle threats in the name of powerless idols. Ruth is all that Jezebel is not, and I wonder if Solomon inherited his wisdom from her?

So ... our story is about this faithful young woman who loves her mother in law and who journeys with her to Bethlehem even though there are no prospects for her there. Ruth's was an undeserved, unmerited, unconditional love. This kind of love changes lives. When this love is woven into human stories, people become better, wholler, fuller people. Ruth's actions provide light in Naomi's darkness, and through this light, eventually, comes the Light that shines in our darkness. From the darkness of Naomi's emptiness comes Ruth, from the helplessness of Ruth's situation comes a redeemer, Boaz, from the love they share comes a son, Obed, from Obed comes Jesse, and from Jesse, a youngest son called David, and from David, one who sits on the throne for ever and ever.

Ruth's unconditional love unlocks God's goodness. Even in the depths of Naomi's difficulty, faithful love is all that's needed to bring providence gloriously into play.

And so Ruth becomes one of four women mentioned in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus. Each one has an unorthodox background. There's Tamar who tricked her father-in-law into a sexual relationship. Rahab who was a prostitute who let the Israelite spies into Jericho. Ruth, a Moabite widow childless for ten years, and married-to-another-man Bathsheba, Uriah's wife, who was seen bathing by King David. Each one of them is less than a picture of perfection by human standards, but each one cherished by God, fundamental to his redemptive plan.

Famine in Bethlehem brings Naomi to Moab. Bereavement in Moab brings Ruth to Bethlehem. Bethlehem brings Ruth to Boaz. Not that it's all plain sailing – no love story ever is. But God is most definitely involved in our human love stories. Were he not, he would be but a mirage, a two-dimensional cut-out caricature. No. God is the God of the

small things. He is involved in the depth of our interactions, telling his story in our hearts, living in our love and revealing himself through our lives.

It nearly doesn't happen though! I mustn't steal too much from Chapter 4, but let me just say that if Elizabeth Bennet nearly marries the pompous Reverend Collins or the villainous Mr Wickham, we are not at all sure that Mr Darcy is going to come through! Things almost don't work out – and yet they do – because God is in this story as he is in your story. His powerful purposes, the force of his providence, and the threads of his love are etched in human history. In the story of this daughter in law and her mother in law, in the story of famine and migration, in disaster and despair – we find the road to Calvary and in Calvary the road to glory.

Understand that when Christ was crucified, Satan thought he had won. When the tomb was sealed, death thought she had won. When temptation, and pandemic, and violence, and injustice, and isolation, and despair, and cancer, and grief, and bitterness seem to triumph ... here too God is alive.

When you can't see him, love anyway, and you will pierce the darkness. And whether you are in Moab in the depth of despair or in Bethlehem harvesting barley, may you be carried by the freight of God's good purposes, may love fill your footsteps, and may you find your rest in Him. In you, and through you, and around you, and above you, and below you, His kingdom will come.

And so to Him be praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power and strength for ever and ever. Amen.

O-O-O

### **PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING AND INTERCESSION**

The book of Ruth tells us that people of all nations are part of God's plan. God calls all people to follow him, and he stands by all people in their difficulties. So let us pray for people everywhere.

We remember before God that there are nearly eight billion people on this planet. Many are not as fortunate in terms of wealth and well-being. Lord, they are all your people and you love them as you love us. Every one of us can know the peace and joy of knowing you. You gave yourself for each of us when in Jesus you went to the cross. You rose again to bring the offer of eternal life to us all. And you breathe your Spirit into us that we may experience your life here and now.

And Lord, we hold before you the countries in which the Covid virus is taking a severe hold – countries without a strong infrastructure of health services and financial support. May the political leaders have the strength and wisdom to guide their countries through the crisis.

We thank you, Lord, that lockdown is easing in the UK.

We thank you for the pleasure of meeting again with family and friends.  
 And we look forward to the time when we will be able to meet again in church.  
 Keep us safe as we take up the activities that we have laid aside.

As society begins to recover, we remember that people are still dying, that many mourn  
 the loss of loved ones, that carers and health workers continue to put themselves at risk.  
 We ask your blessing on them all.  
 Give peace wherever people suffer or are anxious.

Lord, we bring to you those who are especially on our mind,  
 those close to us that we care deeply about.  
 Lord we name them before you and ask your blessing on them.

You know our prayers before they form on our lips.  
 You know our inmost thoughts.  
 You walk before us and alongside us as we journey through life.

Lord, you yourself walked this Earth.  
 You healed the sick, freed people from mental suffering,  
 and spoke the words of life that we hear again today.  
 Lord, thank you for all you have done, and all you will continue to do.

We ask these prayers, and all the prayers of our hearts, in the knowledge and assurance  
 that Jesus Christ is our Saviour, and in him we can trust.  
 Amen

O-O-O

We end with a hymn of thankfulness and assurance of the coming kingdom.

**HYMN: [Jesus shall reign where'er the sun \(StF 328, H&P239\)](#)**

O-O-O

### **BLESSING**

The Lord who conquers darkness with light, give you peace.  
 The Lord who conquers death with life, give you peace.  
 The Lord who conquers loneliness with love, give you peace  
 And may the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit  
 rest upon each one of us now and into eternity.