

SERMON – 25/1/26
'Grace'

Ruth 2:1-23

"Blessed be the man who took notice of you." (Ruth 2:19)

Last Sunday we read the first chapter of the Book of Ruth and considered the theme of homecoming not only in the lives of the characters in the story but also as a spiritual theme for people today, including perhaps ourselves. This morning as we look at the second chapter of Ruth I would like to look with you at the theme of grace.

As with many theological words, a lot of us struggle to grasp the meaning and the significance of 'grace'. Deeply embedded within the human psyche is the notion that we all have to work hard to earn things – we need to work to earn a living, we need to expend effort to earn other people's acceptance, and of course it seems logical to infer that if we are to win God's favour we need somehow to earn it. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. One of my favourite hymns, which we might have sung this morning is 'Rock of ages' and in that hymn the second verse reads as follows: 'Not the labours of my hands can fulfil thy law's demands; could my zeal no respite know, could my tears forever flow, all for sin could not atone; Thou must save, and Thou alone.' The reality is that we cannot earn God's favour we must simply receive it. To get to the point of accepting that truth may require quite a journey and I hope that today's chapter of Ruth may help us along the way.

Ruth, the Moabite woman, has come with her mother-in-law Naomi to Naomi's home town of Bethlehem – both of them are widows, facing a very uncertain future in a culture where, unless they had someone to support them, they would have a real struggle to eke out a living. But immediately we are introduced to one of the humanitarian provisions of the Law of Moses that should still challenge us today. Leviticus 19:9-10 says: 'When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edge of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the Lord your God.' (Lev.19:9-10)

And so it was that Ruth went to glean after the harvesters in the barley fields to gather grain that would keep her and Naomi in bread for the months ahead. Thanks to the provisions of the Law, they would not starve.

But there was more good news. The Law of Moses also made specific provision for those who were widowed without any means of support. The nearest male relative who was eligible should marry and support the helpless widow and it was also specifically written, 'If one of your countrymen becomes poor among you and sells himself to you, do not make him work as a slave. He is to be treated as a hired worker... until the Year of Jubilee. Then he and his children are to be released... They must not be sold as slaves.' (Lev.25:39-42) And in the case of the story of Ruth, in the providence of God, Boaz, in whose fields Ruth ended up gleaning barley, turns out to be the nearest male relative who is willing to provide redemption for Ruth and Naomi. The provisions of God's Law fulfil their purpose and things turn out the way they should do in the purposes of God.

These, in fact, are practical examples of grace in action. In God's Kingdom those who are helpless are to be helped – no question about it – and in God's Kingdom no-one is to be enslaved without hope of release. In God's purposes you and I are offered help in our helplessness and release from our captivity. Just as Ruth threw herself at the mercy of Boaz so that she and Naomi might eat without having sown a crop to harvest, so we can confidently throw ourselves at the mercy of God who has promised to lift us from the mud and mire of our own making to set our feet upon the Rock who is Christ and to give us a firm place to stand. That gracious gift of God in turn prompts in us the motivation to show the same transforming grace to others.

It is no accident that John Newton wrote his famous hymn Amazing Grace, which we will sing shortly, having come to an experience of God's grace in Christ while he was captain of a slave-trading ship. Subsequently, when he became a minister, he had among his congregation a boy by the name of William Wilberforce, later the Member of Parliament who led the campaign to eradicate the scandal of the human slave trade from

the British Empire. The legacy of grace continued to pay dividends.

We may rightly question in our time why the 18th century African slave-trade ever began and why a country like Britain with such a strong Christian heritage should have played such a shameful role in such an abomination (although we do well to ask ourselves what future generations may think of our actions today). For John Newton, slavery was never abstract but concrete, never impersonal but personal. Yet, it was only after many years as a preacher that he joined the abolitionist movement. He wrote, "Disagreeable I had long found it, but I think I should have quitted it sooner, had I considered it, as I now do, to be unlawful and wrong. But I never had a scruple upon this head at the time, nor was such a thought once suggested to me by any friend. What I did, I did ignorantly, considering it as the line of life which Divine Providence had allotted to me, and having no concern, in point of conscience, but to treat the slaves, while under my care, with as much humanity as a regard to my own safety would admit." He later acknowledged, "I hope it will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me, that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders."

For Newton, although brought up in a Christian home, it was 'just a job' which he sought to do as compassionately as he could and to the best of his ability. For the British people, slavery was largely invisible—involving unseen ships and distant colonies. The existence of slaves *inside* the United Kingdom officially became illegal in 1772, but Britain continued to dominate the transportation of slaves overseas. For this reason, every effort was made to help people see the problem. A book entitled *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano The African*, first published in 1789, was one of the few first-hand accounts of slavery and became a publishing sensation, but when the following year, supported by a petition containing nearly 400,000 signatures, William Wilberforce presented to parliament the first of his *ten* attempts at a Bill to abolish slavery, he was thwarted by the fact that many of his supporters chose to attend the opera on the night of the vote and the vested interests of British commerce won the day. It would not be until three days before

Wilberforce's death in 1833 that the last vestiges of slavery were banished from the Empire.

The story of Ruth is a personal account of the transformation that the amazing grace of God being worked out in practice by Boaz can bring about. Humanly speaking, Ruth and Naomi's situation was hopeless but their redemption did not remain theoretical – it was enacted and it brought new life, just as God intended.

Ruth is a refugee and wealthy Boaz ensures that his harvest workers allow her to pick up enough grain to support herself and her widowed mother-in-law. By contrast in our society where profit almost exclusively directs how many businesses operate we have something to learn here, I think. There *is* enough food in the world to go around and yet too many people have too little and too many of us have too much. 'Freely you have received, says Jesus. Freely give.' (Matthew 10:8)

Boaz goes the second mile. He doesn't just fulfil his legal obligations to allow a refugee to scrape together enough food just to keep from starving, he reflects the grace of God by telling Ruth to drink from the water his men have brought from the well, inviting her to stop for a midday meal with his workers and giving her a doggy bag to take home to Naomi. And in this morning's chapter he also tells his harvesters to pull some stalks of barley and drop them for Ruth to pick up. He is not embarrassing Ruth but is acting graciously and generously towards her. That is how God in Christ acts towards us and that is how we as followers of Jesus are challenged to behave towards others. In the Book of Acts we read that in the early Church 'there were no needy persons among them' – I wonder if we can say the same about *our* living out of the Christian faith?

We sing, and sing with gusto and rejoicing, 'Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.' But just how much of the amazing grace that we have been shown by God in Jesus Christ do we extend to others in our world of suffering? Are we not part of a system that, in direct contravention of the law of God, harvests to the very edge of the field and gives nothing at all to the poor of our world? Are we not part of a society that, in

flagrant opposition to the self-giving precepts of Christian redemption, stands by and allows those in our world who have no means of support simply to flounder? Are we not part of a culture that, more than 200 years after our parliament decreed an end to slavery, still shuts its eyes to the plight of those who are enslaved by debt or shackled by drug abuse or suffering violence at the hands of others, and still stops its ears to the cries of those who are trafficked today and sold into prostitution? What will future generations make of *our* slowness to cry out for real, practical justice in our world today?

Naomi said to Ruth, 'Blessed be the man who took notice of you.' Just as we might say 'Blessed be John Newton, blessed be William Wilberforce, who took notice of the transatlantic slaves,' so may we also say, 'Blessed be those who stand up today for the poor and the needy.' In fact, may we give others cause to call *us* 'blessed' because of the action we take to live out the grace of God that we have so freely received by changing our world for the better.

And may many, many people have cause to sing with us: "'tis grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home."