

Sunday 8th November 2015 Grahamstown Cathedral 7.30 & 9.30 a.m.		REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY 24th Sunday after Pentecost
Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17	Ps 127	Heb 9:23-28
		Mark 12:38-44
INVITATION TO LIFE		

“Naomi took the child and laid him in her own lap, and she became his foster-mother. Her ... neighbours gave him a name: ‘Naomi has a son; we shall call him Obed,’ they said. He became the father of Jesse, David’s father.” (Ruth 4:17)

Remembrance Sunday

Last Sunday evening, many of us gathered for the All Souls service, as we remembered before God loved ones who had died. Today, the Sunday nearest November 11th, is another day of remembering: it is Remembrance Sunday, in memory of all who have died in war, from World War One, World War Two, and recent conflicts, in South Africa and elsewhere. As we remember all who have died, we also acknowledge the scars left by war. It is said that there are no unwounded soldiers.

We also pray for the diocese of Umzimvubu, following the destruction of their diocesan centre and the old Cathedral, by fire, this past Friday, 6th November. The Archbishop has written to express his pain and devastation at “this loss and act of callousness”, and asks for our prayers.¹ We are surrounded by conflict, both within and without.

So today is one of those immensely painful days – as my children would put it, a “deep” day, a day almost impossible to capture in words. It is something we feel, and hold in our hearts, in silence, in lament, in grief, in sorrow. It is a day to say a solemn thank you, because lives were given, and in the midst of all the horror and loss of

¹ Letter to Bishops and Deans of ACSA, 6th November 2015

war, there is that dream and belief that people were fighting for freedom, for justice, and for peace.

And it is a day on which we need to repent, because warfare and violence are signs of failure, they are the result of sin – the sin of nations, of individuals – our greed, our lust for power, our struggles for wealth, for resources, or simply for a place in the sun. It is our failures - our suspicions, our hatred, our jealousy - that shut us off from one another and we end up with a fight to the death.

Remembrance Sunday is a time to bring our thanksgiving, our repentance at our failures to make for peace, our deep sadness at the suffering of so many – we bring all this to God. Our prayer is that God will bring good out of evil; our faith in the Risen Jesus says that evil and sin and death do not have the last word.

Our readings

Our readings for today help us to do this. At first glance, they seem quite random – the unnamed woman in the gospel who gave her two cents to God; and a short extract from the story of Ruth. But they offer us a glimpse into the lives and personal struggles of individuals, their response to God, and how things were woven into redemption and hope.

The book of Ruth starts with the simple yet tragic words: “Once, in the time of the Judges when there was a famine in the land, a man from Bethlehem in Judah went with his wife and two sons to live in Moabite territory. The man’s name was Elimelech, his wife was Naomi, and his sons were Mahlon and Chilion... they came to Moab and settled there.” (Ruth 1:1-2)

The story unfolds – the story of these refugees, these foreigners, who looked for a better life in a foreign land. Does it sound familiar to us here in Grahamstown, in South Africa? Drought and famine – the disaster that is even now unfolding in parts of our country; refugees

and foreigners, people looking for a better life amongst us; or those who have left South Africa for greener pastures.

At first things look good. Both boys marry local women. But then Elimelech dies; his two sons also die; and Naomi is left, a widow, childless, in a foreign land, amongst strangers, with only her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, with her. She decides to return to her home country. Ruth decides to go with her. She says to Naomi, “Where you go, I shall go, and where you stay, I shall stay. Your people will be my people, and your God my God.” (Ruth 1:16) And so Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem.

The reading we heard picks up in the middle of the story, and shows us how it all ends: Ruth approaches Boaz, a local landowner, for help; he agrees to marry her; in due time a child is born to her; Naomi who was both a widow and childless, once again is able to embrace the baby and find life and hope. And this is no random birth: the child born becomes the grandfather of David, the greatest king that the nation ever had. Ruth the foreigner is remembered for ever as the ancestor of King David.

It is the story of one woman – but a woman who became part of God’s people, a woman who is embraced and loved and saved. It is a story for our time, this time of xenophobia and of refugees, the impact of war and drought and famine; the huge movement of people from Syria into Europe; the move of people into our country; the sober reminder to be aware of widows, children, strangers, the people who are the most vulnerable in times of war and conflict – as we have seen here in Grahamstown in recent weeks.

The story of Ruth is the story of Boaz, a generous man who welcomed her into his home, and made her his wife. It is the story of all who have tried to make a difference over these past two weeks, giving help to those who have been displaced.

The story of Ruth is also a story of salvation, a journey into faith and belief. It is your story and my story. Ruth represents the outcast, the

person looking for a new life, who goes with Naomi to find God. What is initially simply the loyalty of a daughter-in-law to her mother-in-law becomes a spiritual pilgrimage, conversion, a journey into new life in Christ. Boaz who saves Ruth is the Christ-figure in this story: the one who reaches out and embraces and loves and accepts. And Obed, the baby born to Ruth, is the sign and promise of the new life and hope we receive from Jesus.

Lives precious in the sight of God

We read the story of Ruth, Naomi, Boaz - and we see the hand of God in the lives of these individuals, as God brings something quite wonderful out of sorrow and loss. Individual stories, journeys of faith and struggle, and wonderfully woven into God's great work of salvation: Naomi the wanderer; Ruth the seeker; Boaz the Christ-figure. Lives precious to God.

Your life and mine is precious in the sight of God. The lives of each one of us, those around us, are precious in the sight of God. Those who are unemployed – God sees you. Refugees – God sees you. Students struggling to cope with exams – God sees you. Parents wondering desperately where to find the money for university for their children – God sees you. Those quiet acts of generosity, like the unnamed widow in our Gospel story – God sees you; and perhaps you are the Christ-figure, the sign of hope and life and salvation. When you think that no-one knows or cares for you in your deep distress – God sees you. The people of the diocese of Umzimvubu – God sees you. In your quiet cries of despair – God sees you. In your longing for new life and hope, new birth – God sees you.

Today, on Remembrance Sunday, we remember the millions and millions of people, soldiers and civilians, who died in the two World Wars, and more recently. These are not lives lost and forgotten. God sees each one, and knows the pain and the loss. Each life is precious in the sight of God.

We continue to live in dark and fragile days, a community at war with itself. Yet there are small signs of hope. There are efforts to rebuild and bring those displaced back into town. Help generously given. University exams are being written on most campuses. I am concerned that some campuses have seen further disruption to learning and exams, and damage to university property – thankfully not here at Rhodes. As parents, with both our daughters at university next year, Claire and I, along with many parents, are watching anxiously at how things unfold. And as Dean, as your pastor, I am aware of many of our students who are facing huge financial crises when it comes to fees. No-one should be prevented from receiving a tertiary education for financial reasons.

CONCLUSION

When a war ends, those who were fighting have to find ways to make peace and build a future together. There is only one earth, one world – one country. We have to find a way to keep talking and to address the issues. How do we restore relationships of trust and mutual respect? When there is aggression and intimidation and violence, how do we find a way forward together? What can you and I do to keep listening, to build bridges, to create hope? How can we be Jesus to one another?

So we come to God, so that out of our struggles and longings and fears, God may bring new life.

And we affirm once again that evil and sin and death do not have the last word; that nothing can separate us from the love of God; that all things work together for those who love God, those who are called according to his purpose; that in the midst of the darkest days, the light of Christ shines.

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November 2015