

*“Let me go to the field, and glean among the ears of grain after him
in whose sight I shall find favour.”*

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Trinity XVIII/ St. Luke (transf.) / Choral Evensong

St. Peter's Cathedral, PBCS NS/PEI

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My thanks to Fr. Peter Harris and to St. Peter's Cathedral for the privilege of being here and speaking to you this evening. I hope that this can be the beginning of an annual Choral Evensong in the Fall sponsored by the Prayer Book Society of Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. There is something wonderfully calming, beautiful and intentional about Evensong. It is, dare I say, one of the glories of our Anglican witness to the Catholic Faith. I am most grateful for the wonderful musical offering of your choir. Actually, I think that all I have to say has been sung already in that lovely motet by Giovanni Croce. *Gaudate et Exultate!* “Rejoice ye and be exultant,” uplifted, regardless of the hardships of life, even the hardships of persecution! Wonderful.

We seem to be very much in the company of grieving widows and sorrowing mothers! And yet we glean in the fields of Boaz to discover divine truth and human dignity. Perhaps, that is the real mission of the Prayer Book Society in times of uncertainty, of loss and sorrow. Perhaps, in so doing, we shall discover those “*wholesome medicines of doctrine*” delivered to us by such figures as St. Luke.

Naomi has lost her husband Elimelech and her two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, who were also the husbands of her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, the latter after whom *The Book of Ruth* is named. Such situations, though sad, are hardly unique. You only need to think about your own families and your own communities to recall similar sadnesses, sorrows and losses. And yet, as Paul suggests in our second lesson from his *Letter to the Philippians*, such commonplaces of sadness and sorrow can be the cause of joy and rejoicing. Somehow such circumstances can be the occasions in which Christ is honoured and glorified. In another words, Scripture gives us ways to face the hard and sad things of human life.

Probably written sometime after the Babylonian exile, *The Book of Ruth* with its timeless and reflective mood is notionally set in the time of the Judges. In the Christian Bible, it is found immediately after *The Book of Judges*. In a way, it is a kind of critical commentary on *The Book of Judges*, offering a completely contrasting account of Jewish identity and mission. *The Book of Judges*, like many of the early books of the Hebrew Scriptures, is written from a kind of exclusionary viewpoint with the emphasis upon Israel as the *Chosen People* separate and apart from the nations round about. It is a point-of-view that has a long pedigree. Over and against that stands another perspective

which emphasizes the role and mission of Israel as *"a light to lighten the Gentiles,"* as Isaiah puts it and which the *Nunc Dimittis* from Luke's Gospel repeats in our evening liturgy, the idea that what has been proclaimed to Israel is for all people, something universal in principle. These tensions define Jewish history and thought, oscillating between the one and the other, and in the Christian understanding resolved in Christ.

God's covenant with Abraham embraces both those moments in the idea of the Promised Land and the Promised Son through whom, however, *"all nations shall be blessed."* *The Book of Ruth* particularly challenges the idea that God is the possession of the people of Israel only. Ruth, herself a widow, insists on going with her widowed mother-in-law, Naomi, back to Naomi's people in Bethlehem even though she is not herself an Israelite but a Moabitess. As the story unfolds in our lesson this evening, Ruth is befriended and protected by Boaz who takes her as his wife. She will bear a child, *Obed*, who will be the father of *Jesse*, the father of *David*, the great shepherd-king of Israel. In the Prayer Book lectionary, the story of Ruth is also read during the days of Christmas week precisely because of that theme of the universal realized in and through the particularity of Christ's Incarnation, whose humanity is derived in part through the royal house of David. Ruth goes to Bethlehem even as Christ, the Incarnate Son of God, is born in Bethlehem and goes forth from there for our salvation.

Our lesson this evening follows upon this wonderful moment of Ruth's decision. Against Naomi's protests, she had responded with a wonderful kind of faith statement: *"Your people shall be my people and your God my God."* This transcends the tribalisms of ancient and modern religion and culture and challenges the particularist perspective that often appears throughout the early historical writings of the Scriptures. And, certainly, *The Book of Ruth* breathes a far different air than the Books of Joshua and Judges. Those books are about conquest and settlement through warfare and battle; bloody tales indeed. The Judges, whether Deborah or Samson, to name but two, are strong and charismatic figures but almost adolescent and naïve in their actions and thoughts. Not so with Ruth.

She is a strong woman, mature and wise, but her strength lies in her insight into the nature of God. She has a hold of the universality of God and of his absolute and almighty nature. These will become part and parcel of the Jewish, Christian and Islamic understanding of the essential attributes of God who is not to be reduced nor confined to the things of the world whether tribal, social, political or economic, but remains sovereign and free. Human dignity finds its freedom precisely in relation to such an understanding of God.

There is a quality of quiet dignity and perseverance about the character of Ruth. In a way, she refuses simply to be defined by her grief and sorrow. Her insight is about a relationship to God which transcends the limits of human experience. Her words open us out to the majesty and the truth of God. It is something which is wonderfully

captured, too, in the first article of the Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles. It begins with a theological statement about God which belongs to the wisdom of the ancient Greeks, Judaism and Islam as well as orthodox Christianity. It is like what the Antiphon for the Magnificat says about St. Luke, about gleaning from the wisdom of the ancients with diligent enquiry and gaining a deeper insight into the nature and truth of God. Here is how the Article begins.

There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body, parts, or Passions; of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the Maker, and Preserver of all things both visible and invisible.

Then it proceeds to define the essential Christian understanding of the majesty and truth of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

And in unity of this Godhead there be three Persons, of one substance, power, and eternity; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

The difficulties of the contemporary Church are simply about a complete lack of conviction and confidence in the idea of God in his majesty and truth. We have “domesticated divinity,” as the writer Flannery O’Connor so tellingly puts it, and in so doing are bereft of any understanding that can bring dignity and compassion to our world and day. We are dead to the reality of God. Ruth’s words recall us to something fundamental and basic, to the universality of God and his people, to the majesty of his eternity and truth. He cannot be confined to the little systems of our world and day and, insofar as the institutional church worships itself and its bureaucratic structures, let alone its attempt to re-imagine God and religion, it is utterly dead to God and to the Gospel which is our freedom to proclaim.

I like to think of *The Book of Common Prayer* as being like *The Book of Ruth*, a book for all people, a book which opens us out constantly and emphatically to a theological understanding of God and his people. It is not about our tribalisms, about the identity politics of our confused church and world. It emphasizes instead our catholic and theological identity as Christians. We need to glean again in the field of Boaz to discover the truth of our catholic and Anglican identity as Christians.

The Book of Ruth recalls us to the theological vision which in turn shapes our manifold activities. We forget precisely what she intuitively: we live for God and not God for us. In the Christian understanding that idea is intensified in Christ. As Paul puts it, “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus” ... who “humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross” ... “that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father”; the one “in whose sight [we] shall find favour.” Such are “the wholesome medicines of the doctrine” of Christ that are a balm of healing to our souls,

to our church, and for our world. Such, too, is the role and mission of the Prayer Book Society: to glean again for our church an understanding of the high things of God.

Far from being simply world denying, it is about the redemption of the world in Christ, *“holding forth the word of life; that [we] may rejoice in the day of Christ.”* We live for the praise of God even in times of sorrow and loss. That is our joy and our freedom.

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