

## OUT OF THE BOX

Sudoku, a current mass-market game, salutes being 'inside the square' with only one answer thinking. But our readings this week look at a range of God – out-of-the-box responses from Naomi, Ruth and Jesus.

In a salvation story encompassing all of humanity, Naomi gets Ruth from Moab hooked up with Boaz, a descendent of Lot, Abraham's nephew. Now we've got Moabites marrying Israelites – is nothing sacred? We learn that both Jews and non-Jews are sacred.

The women of the neighbourhood name Ruth and Boaz's boy, Obed, which means 'to serve'. He became the father of Jesse, the father of David which leads us, with a leap of a few centuries, to Jesus.

Jesus can be a problem for us in today's world. Apparently he had not attended the financial seminars that celebrate the gold, silver and bronze givers. Jesus says, 'Let's celebrate, instead, the widow's five cent pieces.'

Widows frequently appear in both the Old and New Testaments as a symbol of society's most vulnerable members worthy of special care. Naomi is cared for by Ruth and Boaz: the NT widow gives not out of her excess, but out of her poverty – Jesus deeply cares for her. We are reminded that *what* we give of ourselves and our possessions is of lesser importance compared with *how* we give to others. God always looks on our hearts.

Naomi and her family had a good life. She left with in Judah and gained prosperity in Moab. Her life turned for the worse with the death of her husband and sons. Naomi returned to loss and need. She was depressed and bitter and it seemed that God was silent in this first season of Naomi's story. However, God's faithfulness is embodied in Ruth a non-Jew. And she is a woman, not a man, poor not wealthy. Yet she, the daughter-in-law, says to her mother-in-law, 'Wherever you go, I shall go.' What a gift!

In Jewish society the words from Leviticus to farmers, would have been lived out, 'You shall not reap your fields to its very border, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest... you shall leave them for the poor and the foreigner.' Lev.19:9-10 Implied in gleaning is an ethic of gratitude for the source of the harvest – our good God. But Ruth must take risks: scraping up sustenance from the leftovers of those with plenty, wandering as a stranger in foreign fields and standing as a lone woman risking harassment. Can we see in Ruth the plight of the refugee, the widow and the migrant worker? And, how do we move beyond gleaning to generous giving in a truly shared harvest? The answer is in today's gospel reading.

While we have become used to interpreting the NT widow's story as Jesus praising her generosity, there is a more historic interpretation. Jesus saw temple-giving as exploitation of the vulnerable by the religious elders, and it was disguised by them as God's will. 'The Pharisees were lovers of money'. Luke 16:14. The temple cult demanded such extortion from the poor – they *had*

to give all and more. The widow could not actually afford the amount she gave. She gave from her sustenance not from her surplus. Jesus is actually condemning the system. This lesson was clearer to the listeners than it is to the Gospel commentators.

We give charitable gifts. We give church offerings. We give to those we know in many ways, with food, plants, fruit and veg etc. We also gift the majority of our income to ourselves. I mean, 'We have to live, don't we?' But there was one exception in ancient Jewish life – family. If someone needed something it was simply given because they were family. Jesus is really asking everyone to give like this. He's saying, 'Treat all people as if they were your family.'

'Lord, we're doing our best...' we think. But are we? God who looks on our hearts, knows whether we are generous in spirit. It doesn't matter whether we have reached a stage in life where we are gleaning – accepting a pension from the government and drawing carefully on our 'nest eggs' – or happily donating because we can. God alone is the source of all that is good and his grace and blessings are available to us all regardless.

Let's offer our simple response to God right now as our intention to be 'cheerful-out-of-the-box-givers'. AMEN



#### Readings

Ruth 3;1-5; 4;13-17

Mark 12; 38-44

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