

St Columba: 1 November 2009

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

Mark 12:38-44

Good luck/Bad luck

Some questions for All Saints and Halloween

"What stirs your memories in this season?
Who are the folks, living or dead, who linger close in these days?
Whom do you gather with?
Who or what haunts you?
How do your memories help inspire your path ahead?"

Today is All Saints Day
Last night was Halloween

Both these traditions have very mixed heritage in the Christian Church....and neither is about ghosts and ghouls! Both do however turn our attention to people who have gone before us including people who have died. (Most world religions have a festival that does something similar.)

Both festivals are quite mixed up and include bits from other traditions. The *All Saints* festival of the Christian tradition attempts to put a gloss on the much earlier British Druid festival that pointed toward the beginning of winter and the lengthening of the dark night. The early Druid festival pointed people toward a possible breakdown in the barriers between the living and the dead – (All Saints has had

some of this too). Early Celtic Christianity lit bonfires and danced and sang celebrating Jesus *the light of the world, the one come to banish all darkness*. It also celebrated the ordinary saints who did not have a special feast day of their own, but who nevertheless influenced our lives and were for us mentors and models of how to live the Jesus Way of love and concern for others.

In 835 Pope Gregory IV tried to make All Hallows/ All Saints a Roman Christian festival and nominated 1st November in the Christian Calendar for its celebration. The focus here was on God's love gathering up all who had died. But as we know, even in 2009, elements of the much earlier pagan festival, with the notion of a thin divide between the living and the dead, have not gone away - and we still 'play' at scaring ourselves with imaginary monsters, ghosts and spooky things. It seems that what we cannot be sure of teases our imagination and our lives always seem to be on the edge between light and the dark – the known and the unknown, the controllable and the uncontrollable, the good fortune and the misfortune!

We have just heard the opening verses from the story of Ruth. This is a good luck/ bad luck story if you like...

Good – food and family for Naomi and Elimelech in Bethlehem

Bad the food ran out and they had to leave

Good: they found food and settled in Moab

Bad: Elimelech died

Good: Naomi was not alone, she had two sons

Good: the sons married

Bad: the sons died

Good: the three women cared for each other

Bad: another famine came this time in Moab....
Moab, the land of plenty turned out to be a land of sterility and death...

And so on ...as the story unfolds there are many twists and turns in the fortunes of Naomi and Ruth as they make their way back to Bethlehem...and re-establish their lives there by unusual means!
(More of that over the next few weeks)

The story of Naomi and Ruth is a bit like our lives in many respects – the good fortune and then the bad, turning one way and then the other...Most of us can attest to times in the lives of our families over the years where difficulties seem to come one after the other and then there are the periods when all seems well. Life is like that - and there seems to be no explanation.

At a time when all seems to have gone wrong for Naomi – all the men in her family have died leaving her and the daughters in law with no means of support – she determines to return to land from which she came and which once again appears to have food. She would return alone...and seek the charity of Elimelech's brother as was the custom for widows. But Ruth refuses to follow custom and return to her own Mother's house in the hope of finding another husband... (That is not a very likely prospect anyway as she has been married 10years and had no children!)

She commits herself to staying with Naomi and to taking on together whatever life turns up for them next.

Ruth 'loves' Naomi: She displays toward Naomi loving-kindness and loyalty beyond any sense of duty. She, Ruth, is constant in her love for Naomi and remains faithful to her commitment to stay with Naomi through good fortune and misfortune. Even God seems absent from Naomi with the downturn in their fortune! Notwithstanding this however, Ruth remains. It is Ruth that keeps hope alive for them both and she takes Naomi's God as her own God, as a sign of her commitment. This little clause, almost too brief to notice, suggests to us that Ruth does not blame God for their predicament! She seems to know that it is in how they behave toward each other and in how they face the twists and turns of life that they will experience God. It's easy to blame or to thank God for the bad and the good, rather than simply recognising that these shifts are part of life. The core thing is how we respond, how we support each other, and the depth with which we acknowledge God in and through our relationships and experiences.

The writer of Mark records for us part of a conversation between a scribe and Jesus:

“To love with all heart and with all understanding and with all strength and to love neighbour as oneself – this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices”

So the learned scribe reports to Jesus, and is told by Jesus that he has answered wisely as is not far from the kingdom of God.

Ruth seems to have known this too, with her love that goes far beyond duty. This woman from outside the community of the chosen ones, one who not even a worshipper of Yahweh, seems to know what it is that is required to live according to God's covenant. She models for us

an approach to life and relationships that Jesus, much later, urges his followers to adopt... an approach to life in which committed care for each other is at the centre.

Here among outcast, poor women: the lowest in the social order is our model for living: wholehearted love and respect for one another that does not prioritise self but seeks to remain connected, one with another.

Here is a woman who points us toward the steadfast love of our God. Ruth is an unlikely messenger who shares with us a story of this loving God.

No matter the twists and turns, the fortune and misfortune, Ruth's example reminds us life is just like that: but

it for us to be hope and life *for each other* when misfortune faces us,

it is for us to be the love of God for each other and to hold hope and point toward the ways of life that will likely be at the next turn.

Good fortune and misfortune alike, God is with us, as we are with each other with love beyond the requirements of duty.