



Sermon preached by Richard Lewney on 12th May 2024

Readings: Ruth 1.1-17; Mark 7.24-30; 2 Corinthians 9.10-15

Christian Aid week

Unconditional giving

I want to pick out three things that our three readings from Scripture this morning have in common.

The first thing is that they all concern someone who *was in real need of help*.

In our Old Testament reading from the book of Ruth, Naomi and her husband Elimelech migrate from their home in Bethlehem to the adjacent country of Moab to escape famine. They have two sons who marry Moabite women: Ruth and Orpah. But Naomi suffers tragedy: first her husband and then her two sons die before her. As a widow with no sons in a patriarchal society she faces destitution; so, now the famine is over, she decides to go back home to try and find support there. Rather than drag her daughters-in-law down with her, she releases them from their family obligation: 'turn back' she says, 'go back to your people, find another husband there'. And, you think, fair enough: their future depends on their getting married. Orpah agrees. But Ruth refuses. And in one of the highlights from the book, Ruth makes her beautiful vow of wholehearted commitment to Naomi:

Where you go, I will go;
where you stay, I will stay;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.

So, if you remember the rest of the story, they go to Bethlehem, but they are on the breadline: widows with no land to farm. They *need* an opportunity to work. Ruth takes on the risk and hard work of gleaning in the harvest fields. That means she followed along behind the harvesters to gather any grain that they left behind: the crumbs off the table, you might say. Happily, the fields belong to Boaz, who turns out to be one of Naomi's extended family. He arranges that Ruth has plenty to glean, so that her work yields a generous return to take back to Naomi. The urgent need of these two women is met.

In our gospel reading, Jesus and his friends have gone to the port of Tyre, in the land of the Phoenicians north of Galilee. They've gone there for 'time out'. Somehow a woman from the town knows of his reputation. Her *need* is that her little daughter is sick: she's described as having 'an unclean spirit'. The mother kneels before Jesus and begs him to heal her child, to cast out the spirit. After an initial rebuff she persists, in desperate humiliation: 'even the dogs eat the crumbs off the table'. And her daughter is healed. Her urgent need is met.

Our reading from Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth is part of his plea in chapters 8 and 9 that they join with other churches in what is now Greece and Turkey to send financial support to the Christians in Jerusalem. We don't know why that support was needed at that time: perhaps there was a famine. We guess that the *need* must have been desperate, because Paul notes in his letter that the Christians in Macedonia in northern Greece have responded with generosity despite the fact that they have very little themselves.

So that's one thing these readings have in common: they all concern someone who is in desperate need: two cases of extreme poverty and one of a mother in despair at the condition of her little girl.

A second thing that they have in common is that they all involve extraordinary *care offered across a cultural divide*.

Ruth is a Moabitess. At various times in history, there seems to have been little love lost between Israel and its neighbour Moab. But Ruth cares for Naomi, an Israelite, and Boaz, an Israelite, cares for her.

And of course the whole point of our gospel reading is that the woman in Tyre is a Gentile. We don't know quite why Jesus initially responded as he did, rejecting her request, and we don't know what his tone of voice was, but the meaning of his words is clear: 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' Priority is to be given to the children of God: Jesus' compatriots, Jews. 'The dogs', Gentiles, must wait. The woman, in her desperation, is beyond caring about her status. Her only concern is her child. 'I may be a dog to you, but even the dogs glean the children's leftovers.' And Jesus, finding extraordinary faith in an unexpected place, pronounces healing for the girl. The episode recalls another time when Jesus is astonished at an expression of Gentile faith: that of the Roman centurion seeking healing for his slave. The deep cultural divide between Jew and Gentile is crossed.

And in his requests on behalf of the Jerusalem church, Paul is asking for help from the mostly Gentile Christians in Achaia, Macedonia and Asia to support the Jewish Christians they've never met in Jerusalem. That's the same Jerusalem church that a decade or so earlier was so suspicious about the growth of the first Gentile church in Antioch and sought to impose on them its own cultural customs and practices.

Extraordinary care offered across a cultural divide, overcoming traditional enmity.

The third thing that I think these readings have in common is the grace, the *unconditional* giving of the help that was needed.

Where you go, I will go;
where you stay, I will stay;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.

That was Ruth's commitment to Naomi. It was all-in. And, even in a deeply patriarchal society, Boaz later respects Ruth's initiative and does not demand any quid pro quo for his protection for her.

In the episode at Tyre, whatever the reason for Jesus' initial words of rebuff, in the end the act of healing is a no-strings-attached overflow of blessing. It's not a transaction: 'show me your faith and I'll heal your child'. Like all the healings recorded in the gospels, it's a demonstration of the kingdom of God breaking in and overturning, defeating the way of the world. And now that kingdom of grace starts to extend into Gentile territory.

And in the letter to the Christians in Corinth, Paul goes out of his way to emphasise that any gift that they choose to make is a matter of their own free choice. In a culture in which the giving of help is routinely part of the patronage system, with all the attendant obligations required of the recipient client, no such relationship is expected here. It could not be clearer. The word that we often translate 'grace' or 'free gift', 'charis', appears ten times in chapters 8 and 9. And in Chapter 8, Paul unambiguously connects the gift that the Corinthians may offer with the gift that they have received from God in Jesus.

'Now as you excel in everything - in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you - so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking. [i.e. in this 'grace']

I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. For you know the generous act [i.e. grace] of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.'

And so to today. In some ways, giving financially to support those in need is a complicated thing. We may be aware of the need in well-publicised cases; we may not be aware when the need is chronic rather than a newsworthy crisis, as in Burundi. We need organisations like Christian Aid to identify the places where financial help can make a real difference to people *in desperate need*. We need those crucial links that Christian Aid establishes with local partners *to cross the cultural divide* between us and rural Burundi, or wherever it is. And we need the relationship of mutual respect to offer and receive a freely-given gift, an act of grace, rather than a 'gift with strings attached'. We don't want to promote dependence or a sense of indebtedness, financial or moral. We don't seek to build up so-called soft power. Instead, we want to promote dignity, justice and a fair distribution of resources. These are the reasons we support Christian Aid, either directly or via Commitment for Life.

As we read from 2 Corinthians 9:

'Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!'

Richard Lewney
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