

Sunday 32
8/11/2015

Mark the Evangelist

Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17
Psalm 127
Hebrews 9:24-28
Mark 12:38-44

Gender and power

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr Peter Blackwood

Surely, if you were going in search of piety you would look in a church or a convent or a monastery or a temple – somewhere you would expect to find religious people. When Jesus visited the temple in Jerusalem in Mark 12 he was scandalised by the wealth and power that masqueraded as piety and the poverty of widows. In such a place there should be found goodness, not wickedness.

Jesus launched a scathing verbal attack on the scribes

Mark 12:38-40 ³⁸ As he taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, ³⁹ and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! ⁴⁰ They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

This business about devouring widows' houses is curious. There are two possible explanations for it. One is that women who had no husband or male kin had no one to discharge their property business. The task would be given to those with high standing in the community, notably the scribes. They earned their reputation for piety and trustworthiness by their long prayers. A percentage would be taken for services rendered as property trustees, but the practice was also open to embezzlement and abuse.

Another explanation for Jesus outburst against scribes stems from Jesus' fierce opposition to exploitation in the temple and the crippling demands made on the people for the upkeep of the institution. The argument goes that the poor had too much pressure placed on them to maintain a place of piety that was actually ripping them off.

All this raises questions about the widow who put her last two mites in the temple treasury. Was Jesus commending her piety and trust in God by not withholding her very last coins, or was he criticising a religious system that allowed such destitution to live beside flamboyant wealth and power?

The story of Ruth is about the plight of widows too. Naomi, Orpah and Ruth were widowed in Moab and Naomi went home to Bethlehem and Ruth went with her. The drought had broken and there was plenty again, but the women could not claim their own land, it must be redeemed by a male family member. Well that's only part of the problem. In order for the widows in this story to gain benefit from their land one of them needs to marry the man who redeems Naomi's land. Couched in its quaint biblical language we read the story of Ruth as a beautiful love story, and so it is. But, in our pious innocents we miss some of the shameless feminine strategies that are used to accomplish a love match that will give Naomi what is justly hers anyway. This story has the most blatant account of seduction we can imagine. During the harvest Naomi gets Ruth to go into the fields to glean. This was a lovely law that enabled the poor and landless to get some food. The corners of the fields were to be left ungathered. Olives were harvested by hitting the branches with sticks. Only the poor and

landless could pick the stubborn olives. Grape vines were to be gone over only once, no going back for the bunches that had been slow to ripen, they were for the poor. Ruth went gleaning and her beauty caught the attention of Boaz who had a right to redeem Naomi's land. But this match maker left nothing to chance. Naomi planned an all-out proactive offensive. She advised Ruth that when Boaz lay down to sleep she should uncover his feet and lay beside him. Our innocent response is, well that's all very cute, until we learn the term 'feet' was a euphemism for that which the convention of pulpit language prevents me from telling you. Suffice it to say that Naomi advised Ruth to shamelessly seduce Boaz to ensure a marriage and the benefits of the land that was theirs anyway.

At one level this story is telling us that the grandmother of King David was a foreigner. At another level the story exposes serious gender inequities in the law of Moses. Like Jesus who exposed injustices in the temple system, the story teller of Ruth has woven a yarn that revolves around the legal conventions of Torah with regard to property and the poor and women and exposes their injustice. It's subtle, but it's there.

The stories of Ruth and Jesus are both very political. The story of Ruth is most obviously political because it was told at a time when the Jews were returning from exile in Babylon. There was a strong push to purify the race. One political wing advocated that the foreign wives and their children should be sent back to their own land. The storyteller of Ruth was saying, what nonsense is this, the grandmother of King David was from Moab and we don't like Moabites.

And when Jesus visited the temple in Jerusalem, he roundly condemned the practices of the religious bits of his society for their oppression of those most vulnerable.

We have all heard lessons from these texts that inspire us to be more like Ruth in her faithfulness to Naomi, to imitate that battler spirit and wholesome rural, out in the fields gleaning barley kind of life-style. We have certainly been drawn to the extraordinary generosity of the widow in the temple who gave all she had to the temple treasury, thus placing all her trust in God for survival.

These are good lessons for us to learn, but today I want to ask some different questions of these stories – then we find some other answers that give us a different slant on these old lessons.

There were beautiful laws in the Torah for the widows and landless, but why did the widow Naomi have to enter such a convoluted conspiracy with her daughter-in-law to acquire her own husband's land. She had to fight against her society's rules and the power structures in order to achieve what she most needed – the status of a mother of a son, and land to feed her.

The situation in the temple when Jesus watched the treasury being filled was appalling. The question has to be asked – what is going on in a holy place when a woman is allowed to give all she has to support an institution that pays particular honour to wealth and opulence?

These were political debates from ancient times and their parallels are easily found in our own time – debates around tax reform and the sharing of wealth, of gender and racial equality. These stories from Scripture tell our own stories.

The Temple in Jerusalem was not exempt from any of these kinds of questions. Widows in Bethlehem had to work societies systems as best they could to achieve what they needed to survive. Why should the church be any different? Why should our society built so much under the influence of the church be any different? Well we should be different – why?

Because Jesus came and pointed his finger at what was wrong (Mark 12:38 "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the

marketplaces), and he came and pointed his finger at what was right (Mark 12:42 A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins).

So in our own lives, our personal and communal lives, our institutional and global lives we might stop and look and see just where Jesus' finger might be pointing.

The problem is that we find Jesus points at what is good and what is ungodly so how do you know if the finger is pointing at what is censured or what is commended? The rule of thumb when it comes to Jesus' pointing finger is that he seems to point in the direction of the little ones when he wants us to know what is commendable. Beware of the finger that points to following procedures and regulations that thwart doing what is faithful and wise. Beware the finger that points to self-importance. Beware the finger that points out our clambering over others to satisfy our own desires, or pushing aside those who threaten our cosy existence.

But, if power is being given to the powerless, if food is being given to the hungry, if love is being given to the lonely, if faith is being given to the fearful – chances are, they shall be reckoned as riches.
