

There is an edge to this morning's reading from the book of Ruth that is quite erotic and perhaps not the topic for Sunday worship. But in and around Ruth's visit to Boaz in the middle of the night there are a number of issues that deserve our attention.

As I mentioned a couple of weeks back the compilers of the three year lectionary (that stipulates the readings to be used in worship on any given Sunday) link the Old Testament to the gospel story.

In this morning's gospel reading from Mark we have two stories in which widows are mentioned. In the Ruth story we also have two main characters who are widows; Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth.

The story of the book of Ruth does a number of things. Its primary task, scholars suggest is to counter Nehemiah's edict that the Jewish men

should renounce their foreign wives and take Jewish wives in their place.

Nehemiah you might remember was charged with restoring Jerusalem after the city had been overrun by the Babylonians. The city walls were smashed down, the buildings destroyed and the people were taken into exile. Only a remnant was left behind.

It was while the majority of the Jews were in exile that racial purity became so important. The whole point of resettling a defeated nation, pillaging their homes and cities, and raping their women was to destroy the vanquished as a recognizable race and assimilate them into the population of the victor.

In order to preserve their identity as a people the Jews imposed strict taboos on who could marry who. The other distinguishing features of their religion such as circumcision and dietary practices also became very important.

Nehemiah felt that the destruction of the city had come about because God was displeased with the people of Israel. He reasoned that God would remain angry with Israel while ever people failed to act in accordance with the covenant.

He perceived that those who had remained in Jerusalem had been less strict about preserving their racial integrity than those who had been taken into exile. They had intermarried with non Jews and had adopted the religious practices of their victors.

Nehemiah was adamant that this laxness should be redressed and insisted that all the foreign wives should be put aside. The book of Ruth's message is that Ruth a Moabite woman gave birth to a child.

This child was suckled by Naomi a Jewess and that this child (Jew and Moabite) was the ancestor of David. And David was revered as King of Israel.

“How could it be?” the author of the book of Ruth poses the question. “Can Nehemiah possibly be right to insist on the Jewish men dismissing their foreign wives simply because they were not Jewish when David's ancestor was a Moabite?”

This then is perhaps the primary purpose of the book of Ruth. Another purpose and perhaps the point of connection with this morning's gospel story is the plight of widows.

We are speaking here of a paternal society where a woman's place was determined by her relationship with her father, husband or son/s.

Widows needed to rely on their children for a place in society or remarry. Naomi was without a husband or children. Her two sons had also died leaving her destitute in a foreign land.

She returned home with one of her daughters-in-law and was naturally anxious to see that Ruth found a place in society. Some suggest that Naomi

may well have had another motive for arranging for her next of kin to provide Ruth with a child according to the custom of the day.

It meant that Naomi was once again a member of a family and had someone to offer her shelter in her old age and providing her with a place in society.

What the Ruth reading helps to bring to our attention as we read the gospel stories is an awareness of the lot of widows in ancient (and some might say not too ancient) times. They were vulnerable and in need of protection.

Many in Jesus times and earlier were forced into menial work and even prostitution just to survive. They needed those in authority to protect them, not exploit them as Jesus accused the scribes of doing.

The story of Jesus as told through our Sunday gospel readings is reaching a climax as we approach the end of the church year. Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem and in the first of the two

incidents we read this morning he condemns the scribes. These were the guardians of the sacred stories, the defenders of the faith, and yet Jesus ridiculed them for their hypocrisy and duplicity.

There is the suggestion in this first story that the scribes were prepared to take advantage of widows; encouraging them to sell up their property and then misappropriate the proceeds for their own comfort.

The second account lauds the widow's generosity but there is also the suggestion that this widow (and perhaps others as well) had been prevailed upon to make a contribution that was beyond her means.

Jesus criticism of the scribes offended a powerful group in society virtually guaranteeing that they would move against him to protect their place in society. His ministry to the poor and disadvantaged contrasted with the scribes and

others who profited at the expense of those who were most vulnerable.

The other thread in Jesus closing stages of his earthly ministry is the inclusiveness of his mission. As a descendant of David we are reminded by the reading from the book of Ruth that he had foreign blood in his veins.

Jesus message was one of universal acceptance by God, something the scribes and others found hard to embrace.

Our readings this morning therefore bring us an interesting insight into the life and time of widows Naomi (the Jewess) and her daughter-in-law Ruth (the Moabite) and the rising tensions between Jesus and the scribes and other vested interests in the seats of power in Jerusalem.

They sensitize us to the plight of those who are vulnerable in our society especially those without status and those whose security is threatened.

They challenge us to think about people who are homeless as a result of wars and who are fleeing in fear of their life. They remind us that the only chosen race is the human race.

That Jesus ministry and mission was opposed to anything that took advantage of the vulnerable in society.

As a wealthy nation Australia is challenged to respond to those who are homeless and stateless, who fear for their lives and like Naomi are desperate to carve out for themselves and their children a place they can call home.

Many of those who come to our shores are vulnerable and are easily exploited. We can also feel vulnerable if we are lead to believe that our security is threatened by an influx of desperate people from overseas.

We must not allow people to exploit our fears for their own political ends or exploit those who find themselves homeless and/or stateless.

Our attention this morning has been directed to widows who in times past relied on others for their status within society and who for no fault of their own found themselves in difficult circumstances.

Such a group in our society could be represented by the unemployed, the disabled, refugees and so on.

Our readings this morning speak to us of Israel's struggle to preserve racial purity in the face of evidence that even David the King of Israel had foreign blood. They remind us of how vulnerable people can become when all that they rely on to connect them to society is stripped away.

They remind us of the points of conflict Jesus had with those entrenched in power. And they challenge us reflect on our response as a nation and

as individuals to those who are vulnerable in our world.

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