

Dear Friends,

Oh dear, this one has got a little bit out of hand. It's rather long. Sorry. Normal service will be resumed next time.

RUTH 1: 19-22

Naomi has arrived home after many years away. She has survived famine, but seen her husband and two sons die. The women of the town look at her and say, "Is this Naomi?"

She replies:

"Call me no longer Naomi (which means sweet),  
call me Mara (which means bitter),  
for the Almighty has dealt great bitterness to me.  
I went away full,  
but the Lord has brought me back empty;  
why call me Naomi  
when the Lord has testified against me,  
and the Almighty has done evil to me?"

We noticed earlier that the first mention of God in the book of Ruth is hopeful. God had visited his people and given them bread. But those were the story teller's words. We may already have noticed that Naomi is less sure of God's kindness. Earlier, to her daughters-in-law, she said, "May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me." These words aren't quite what you would usually expect. They are a bit upside down. More often God is the model to be copied. It would not be surprising if Naomi had told the young women to "Be kind as the Lord your God is kind." But instead she prays that God will imitate them. You wonder if she feels that God may need to learn some lessons about kindness from humans.

She goes further when she speaks to the women in Bethlehem. She does not hold her feelings back. She accuses God of testifying against her, harming her and making her life bitter.

It is important that these honest feelings find an expression in the Bible. Many today can point to reasons why their lives are bitter. They may see God as being responsible or they may wonder at God's absence, silence and failure to act when there is so much injustice and suffering.

I watched two films over the weekend. Fifty years separates the making of one from the making of the other. In both we see evil times and evil deeds and we meet people who reach out for God but find nothing.

*No Country for Old Men* was made in 2007. In it the good old sheriff, Ed Tom Bell has played his part in the struggle against evil. But at the end of his career he is

disillusioned. Evil just keeps getting the upper hand. He has seen how people can do brutal things without feeling any remorse. He hoped to find something else as well, but feels disappointed. He says, "I always figured when I got older, God would sort of come into my life somehow. And he didn't. And I don't blame him. If I was him, I'd have the same opinion of me that he does."

The 1957 film *The Seventh Seal* is about a Crusader knight who returns home from the wars. He finds a land ravaged by the plague. Many are dying and others are living in desperate poverty. The knight says, "I want God to put out his hand, show his face, speak to me. I cry out to him in the dark but there is no one there."

Alongside of these fictional accounts of the bitterness of life we have the latest in a very long line of real-world racist atrocities. George Floyd is yet another black man to die while in police custody. We are confronted again by the fact that racism has not gone away. We look back at the horrors of slavery and segregation and wonder how the people of the day were able to take part in it, live with it and put up with it for so long. But then we realise that although those particular manifestations of racism were overcome, racism did not die, it continued to thrive. This latest killing, along with the Windrush scandal and the fact that people from a BAME background are suffering disproportionately from the Coronavirus are yet more evidence of that. We have an opportunity to bring about change. If we don't take it, people in the future will look back on us and wonder how we were able to take part in, live with and put up with the horrors of racism in our day for so long.

The Black Lives Matter campaign has produced a moment of hope. Barbara Glasson, the President of the Methodist Conference has expressed solidarity with that movement. She apologised on behalf of the Church "For being silent when we should have spoken out against the everyday injustices that affect BAME communities." She has also called upon the Church to "Be brave, speak out, speak up and challenge racism wherever we find it, especially when we find it in ourselves." As the time came for slavery and segregation to end, we pray that this might be the good moment when this present form of racism will be overcome. But as racism has risen again in the past, we will need to be vigilant and ready to struggle against whatever form it next takes.

It's not surprising that when people face these deadly injustices that they sometimes cannot really believe that God is with them or that God is active for good. Neither would it be surprising if they felt with Naomi that God had turned against them and was responsible for making their life bitter.

Naomi may not be seeing the whole story. She says, "I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty." The story teller is not quite so sure. Naomi did not really go away "full", she went away because there was famine, there was emptiness in the land. And she does not actually come back empty. The narrator draws attention to what she does have, and that's Ruth. It says, "So Naomi returned together with Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, who came back with her from the country of Moab."

The story teller piles up the different ways of describing Ruth. It's as though they are having a conversation with Naomi and trying to make her see what she does have with her.

"So, Naomi, you have returned with Ruth."

"Who?"

"The Moabite."

"What Moabite?"

"Your daughter-in-law."

Blank look from Naomi.

"The one who came back with you from the country of Moab."

Penny drops, "Oh yes, her."

Perhaps Naomi is not so empty after all. And if only she could open her eyes, she might be able to see that there are other hopeful signs as well. The story teller makes sure that we at least are able to see them. It says, "They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest." Act one began with famine. We felt that it was cruel to show us Bethlehem, the house of bread, when there was not much bread being baked in Bethlehem. But now, at the end of the first act we have returned to Bethlehem and it's the barley harvest. There may yet be bread to eat.

God bless you,

Tony