

ON LIVING IN GOD'S WORLD¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost, 31 October 2021

This is a sermon about living in God's world.² It uses both the reading from Ruth and the gospel reading from Mark. We'll start with Ruth, where we have read the first 18 verses, which set the scene for the rest of Ruth's story. This is the story of three widows, one of whom departs early in the narrative. Elimelech, his wife, Naomi, and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion are economic refugees from Bethlehem, where famine reigns. They flee to Moab, east of the Dead Sea, where there is more food. But Elimelech dies and Naomi is left with her sons, who marry local women, Orpah and Ruth. After about ten years in Moab, Naomi's sons also die, leaving her and her daughters-in-law destitute.

Hearing that things are now better in Bethlehem, Naomi resolves to return home. Our reading recounts how she tried to persuade the younger women to remain in their homeland. Orpah takes this advice and leaves the story. We hear no more of her. Naomi and Ruth go on together. We will hear more of this story next week.

The book of Ruth is full of symbolism. We can see this if we follow the meanings of the names used. "Bethlehem" means "House of Bread", from which the family escaped when bread was not available and to which Naomi and Ruth returned when bread returned. Elimelech, Naomi's late husband, has a name meaning "My God is King", while her name means "Pleasing". On her return to Bethlehem, however, she asks to be called "Mara", which means "Bitter".³ Her sons have unfortunate names. Mahlon means "Sickness" or more specifically, "Consumption", today known as tuberculosis. Chilion means "Wasting", a similar sickness related term. Orpah means "Back of the neck", which is how we see her depart from the story.

Ruth's name means "Compassion for the needs of others", the role she adopts with Naomi. She later marries Boaz— "Strength is within him". Thus, each character has a name befitting their part in the story. In addition, Ruth is consistently called "Ruth the Moabite", emphasising her foreign origin. This reference puts her at odds with religious rules. Deuteronomy is quite clear:

No ... Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord ... You shall never promote their welfare or their prosperity as long as you live.⁴

The inclusion of Ruth in the Bible is, therefore, significant in the light of the point of this story, which appears in its last verses. Ruth becomes that great-grandmother of King David, thus

¹ Readings: Ruth 1:1-18; Psalm 146; Hebrews 9:11-15; Mark 12:13-17, 28-34

² In preparing this sermon, I have been helped by: Laura A Smit and Stephen E Fowl, *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible: Judges & Ruth*, Grand Rapids, Brazos Press, 2018; John Gray, *The New Century Bible Commentary: Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1986; Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: a Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, New York, Orbis, 2017; Marcus J Borg, *The gospel of Mark*, New York, Moorehouse, 2009; Tom Wright, *Mark for Everyone*, London, SPCK, 2001; Craig S Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary* (2nd ed), Downers Grove, IVP Press, 2014

³ Ruth 1:20

⁴ Deuteronomy 23:3, 6

establishing her into Matthew's genealogy of Jesus.⁵ What follows from this is a conclusion that the grace of God has the widest range. If a Moabite can be the great-grandmother of the fabled King David and an ancestor of the saviour, we are all included.

In furtherance of her name, Ruth exercised "hesed",⁶ the Hebrew word used in the book. The NRSV translates this term as "loyalty" or "kindness". It derives from the loyal love of God in fulfilling his covenant to his people and the consequent mutual expression of such loyal love by the people. It refers to the care and concern that one might have for another who is in need or danger. In the well-known verse from Micah, "what does God require of you but to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God",⁷ "kindness" is "hesed". Ruth shows "hesed" by following Naomi home to Bethlehem.

This brings us directly to the second part of this morning's gospel.⁸ Our reading is part of a series of encounters between Jesus and the religious authorities following his cleansing of the Temple in Holy Week. In many of the exchanges the authorities try to set Jesus up. One of those occasions is in the first part of today's gospel, which we will come to soon. The second part is, however, different. A scribe asks Jesus an apparently good faith question. Jesus responds in the words that we hear in every Eucharist when the deacon invites us to confess our sins, a traditional Jewish text.⁹ In essence, this commandment is a prohibition of idolatry, the attempt to pacify hostile gods through sacrificial violence. If you love God in this way, there is no room for the love of anything else.

Jesus then links loving God with loving neighbour by quoting Leviticus.

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord.¹⁰

In short, there is no love of God without love of neighbour. Reciprocal violence in the form of vengeance must be abandoned and replaced by a network of love. The questioner agrees by acknowledging that mutual love is more important than sacrifice. Jesus declares that he is close to the kingdom. This brings the questioning to an end.

That's the good and easy part of the task that I have set myself this morning. What could be better, and more completely in line with the gospel, than to encourage mutual love and respect that mirrors our relationship with God? If I were smart, I would now call it quits, but I said that I would look at the first part of this morning's gospel reading, which appears to be a very different kind of encounter.

While the scribe who asked about the most important commandment appeared to be a genuine inquirer, the Pharisees and Herodians asking the first question are described as setting a trap for Jesus. The trap is about paying taxes to Caesar and is set by an unlikely alliance. The Pharisees were nationalists. They looked forward to the removal of Roman rule, possibly by the Messiah. The Herodians were the clients of the puppet ruler Herod. They depended on the Romans for their existence. That they have conspired together to ask their question, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor", shows that there is no right answer. To say, "Yes, it is

⁵ Ruth 4:13-18; Matthew 1:1-16

⁶ רֶחֶם

⁷ Micah 6:8

⁸ Mark 12:28-34

⁹ Deuteronomy 6:4

¹⁰ Leviticus 19:18

lawful,” is to offend the subject Jewish people. To say “No, it is not lawful,” is to utter treason against the authorities. Whatever Jesus answers will put him at the mercy of one party or the other.

What’s the problem that they present to Jesus? If you heard my sermon at the recent choral evensong for St Matthew, you will know that tax collectors, as agents of imperial oppression were unpopular.¹¹ Their unpopularity flowed from various features of government oppression, including the fact that, as always, the burden of taxation fell on those at the bottom of the social pile. The rich escaped relatively unscathed.

In this case, the question revolves around the imperial currency. A coin produced by Emperor Tiberius bore his image. This offended directly against the Second Commandment, which prohibits graven images. The text on the coinage was equally, if not more, offensive. Around the emperor’s head were the words, “Augustus Tiberius, son of the divine Augustus”. On the other side, which had the image of Pax, the Roman goddess of peace, were the words, “High Priest”. As Tom Wright says, “if the Romans had gone out of their way to be offensive to the Jews, they could hardly have done it better.” Observant Jews would avoid even touching such a coin or have it in their possession.

If this is a not-so-subtle trap, Jesus certainly has a subtle response. He first asks for a coin, suggesting that, as an observant Jew, he did not have one. That they were able to give him one puts them on the back foot. Jesus asks his famous question about the image on the coin and tells his questioners to give to Caesar what is his and to God what is God’s. What does all this mean?

We might begin with what it doesn’t mean. This is not an instruction about the separation of church and state. It is not a division of the world into the religious and secular. Such a concept was not only absent in the time of Jesus, it had no meaning. As the inscription on the coin shows, the Romans linked the state and religion inextricably. So did the Jews. If that were not so, the question does not arise.

But Jesus was baiting his own trap. He knew, and his inquisitors knew, that, according to their common theology, everything belonged to God and nothing to Caesar. Thus, although the statement Jesus made appears even handed, it actually means that Caesar gets nothing. His pursuers could not call Jesus’ bluff without incriminating themselves. Thus, Jesus entrapped his would-be entrappers and his words endorsed his subversive tendencies. Indeed, the knowledge of those tendencies made the question possible in the first place.

Both Jesus and his interrogators knew that the payment of taxes had led to Jewish rebellion. In 6AD, Judas the Galilean instigated a revolt. If it was important to render to Caesar’s what was Caesar’s, and, if we ignore the argument that Caesar was owed nothing, what might be Caesar’s? The short answer was that Caesar was owed revenge and hatred. That was what actually happened. The fall of Jerusalem in 70AD was provoked by a violent response to Roman taxation. The effect of Jesus’ response was, therefore, to forestall a violent reaction by taking the view that Caesar was owed nothing. The kingdom Jesus espoused was not of the expected violent and militarily successful Messiah.

In reality, it turns out that the first part of today’s gospel reading is not as far from either Ruth and the great commandment as we might have imagined. We must show compassion and care

¹¹ [Horsburgh-St-Matthew.pdf \(sjks.org.au\)](https://www.sjks.org.au/Horsburgh-St-Matthew.pdf)

as Ruth did. We must love our neighbour as ourself. We must render to God what is God's, that is, everything.

God knocks at my door, seeking a home for Jesus.
'The rent is cheap', I say.
'I don't want to rent, I want to buy', says God.
'I'm not sure I want to sell,
but you may come in and look around.'
'I think I will', says God.

'I might let you have a room or two.'
'I like it,' says God, 'I'll take the two.
You might decide to give me more some day.
I can wait', says God.

'I'd like to give you more but it's a bit difficult —
I need some space for me.'
'I know', says God, 'but I'll wait;
I like what I see.'

'Hm, maybe I can let you have another room;
I really don't need that much.'
'Thanks', says God, 'I'll take it;
I like what I see.'

'I'd like to give you the whole house, but I'm not sure' . . .
'Think about it', says God, 'I wouldn't put you out;
your house would be mine and Jesus would live in it.
You'd have more space than you ever had before.'

'I don't understand at all.'
'I know', says God, 'but I can't tell you about that;
you'll have to discover it for yourself;
that can only happen if you let him have the whole house.'

'A bit risky', I say.
'Yes', says God, 'but try me.'

'I'm not sure; I'll let you know.'
'I can wait', says God. 'I like what I see.'¹²

¹² Mary Halaska, 'Covenant', in Donal Dorr, *Integral Spirituality: Resources for Community, Justice, Peace and the Earth*, Melbourne, Collins Dove, 1990, pp. 283-4



Naomi Entreating Ruth and Orpah to Return to the Land of Moab (1795)
William Blake (1757-1827)
Wikipedia Commons



Caesar's Coin (1612-1614)
Peter Paul Rubens (1557-1640)

