

Ruth 1: 1 - 18
Psalm 146
Hebrews 9:11 - 14
Mark 12: 28 - 34

Notes on the Old Testament Lesson

When most of us read this passage from the book of Ruth, we focus on the beautiful words of verses 16 and 17. Yet there is more happening in this story.

Verse 1 tells us that there was a famine in the land of Judah so Elimelech left Bethlehem and moved to Moab. This is not a great distance in modern terms. Moab is just on the other side of the Dead Sea (known in that period as the Salt Sea) from Judah. It would, however, been a great distance in spiritual terms as Elimelech and his family moved from an area where Yahweh was the principal deity to a region where idols were widely worshiped.

Elimelech was a man of great faith, as his name itself reveals. "Eli" means "My God". It comes from one of the two names for God in the Old Testament: "El". (Think of "Beth-el" or "Emanuel".) Remember Jesus' words on the cross: "Eli, Eli,..." or "My God, my God...". "Melech" is the Hebrew word for "king". Therefore, Elimelech means "My God is king".

Elimelech and Naomi's sons married Moabite women and remained in that land for about ten years. People married at a very young age, late adolescence or early teens, so when the two sons died, their wives (Ruth and Orpah) would have been in their early twenties. It is very unusual that neither couple had children. This fact, added to the deaths of their husbands, would have made both women feel isolated and bereft of blessings.

There are very few options for widows and none of them are good. Their plight was often grave. This is why there are so many references in the Torah to how widows and orphans should be treated. Returning to Judah was an act of desperation for Naomi. Sending Ruth and Orpah back to their families was a great and sacrificial kindness. Although the daughters-in-law were past the normal age for marriage and were unlikely to find good husbands, returning to their families was the best chance they had. For Naomi, it meant resigning herself to a life of poverty and misery.

Note that both Ruth and Orpah refused to leave Naomi. It was not until Naomi persisted that Orpah left her. This is consistent with Eastern cultural norms. When a woman married, she exchanged one family for another. Her husband's parents are now her parents. Although not all connections with the family from which she came are broken, they are no longer her family. Her husband and his family are hers as well. Ruth's words in verses 16 and 17 describe what all women did when they married. Ruth is affirming that, despite the plight in which the women found themselves, the bond was not broken. She was Naomi's daughter "for better or worse".

Notes on the Gospel Lesson

The passage from Mark's gospel is one of a series of questions being posed to Jesus by Pharisees, Herodians, and Sadducees. There was nothing unusual about this. Jesus was a rabbi and rabbis often taught by answering questions. A rabbi who was in the Temple, and there were many, would be approached by people who would ask questions pertaining to the Torah and to the daily practice of faith.

The first part of Jesus' answer is one that almost any rabbi would have given as he cites Deuteronomy 6: 4 - 5. This is the *Shema*, from the Hebrew word for "hear". This passage is to Judaism, even today, what John 3:16 is to Christianity; a concise statement of the central belief of the faith.

The second part of Jesus' answer comes from Leviticus 19:18; a prohibition against taking vengeance. Quoting from the Torah would have given the questioner the "correct" answer. The scribe who had posed the question enthusiastically affirms Jesus' response. In fact, he does so in a way that elicits praise from Jesus. Perhaps we should ask ourselves how Jesus responds to our comments on his teachings.