

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

ALL SAINTS DAY

SUNDAY 6 NOVEMBER 2011

Rev. Ivan Poole

Ruth 1 :1-18; Wisdom of Solomon 3: 1-9; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25: 1-13

“Faithful Love”

I'm sure that sometime in the past, especially when the Jewish festival of Purim is discussed, you have read or heard the story of Esther, from one of the smaller books of the Bible, the Book of Esther. The story is of the young Jewess who became Queen and saved her people.

Today I thought we would look at another of the smaller books of the Bible and the story it tells, the Book of Ruth. I also want to couple the story of Ruth with this time of the year of the Christian calendar, the celebration of All Saints.

All Saints is officially 1st November, which happened to be last Tuesday. But, if the day does not fall on a Sunday, we generally celebrate it on the Sunday immediately following 1st November, which of course is today.

We are preparing for another Sunday, the day when we talk with the dead. Although you might expect me to refer to the departed on All Saints day, truth to tell, every Sunday is an opportunity for Christians to be with the dead.

Such talk may sound morbid, or very odd. But only if you are unaccustomed to the Christian way of regarding those who have gone before us in the faith. So, for instance today we will be taking our cues from Ruth, David, Paul and Matthew, dead people who have gone before us in the faith. And by the action of the Holy Spirit, through the inspiration of Jesus, these long dead figures walk among us, speak to us, and point us the way.

All Saints day is therefore a grand opportunity for us to be reminded of the gift of the saints, the peculiar wonder of community (the church), that moves forward by looking back, that lives through talk with the dead.

We do not have to make up our faith as we go. There are trustworthy guides who have walked before us - people like Ruth, David, Paul and Matthew and many others who form the 'community of the saints'. They will show us the way, if we have the courage to listen.

Today, as we celebrate All Saints day, it is the day in the church's year when we think about the saints, all of them, all those baptised who have lived the faith, walked the way of discipleship before us, and who now rest from their labours.

Yet not only on this Sunday, but nearly every Sunday, we communicate with the dead. Each Sunday we read from the stories of long dead people like Ruth, or David or Matthew. We believe that they have something to teach us that we could not learn any other way.

Christianity is a 'traditionalist' faith. Among the disciplines of discipleship is a willingness to listen to the dead, to give them a privileged place in our conversation.

Whilst we moderns tend to see ourselves as distinct from the past, we must remember that we are part of the past.

Often with the young and sometimes others, the past is dismissed as irrelevant. Prejudice against the past accounts for the often superficial nature of our society.

When a generation thinks that it has nothing to learn from the past, it must forever 'recreate the wheel' morally, spiritually, intellectually.

We don't speak of death directly very often in church, except at funeral times. We speak of grace, forgiveness, even sin and new life; but we spend very little time talking about death.

Just as without leave-taking, there can be no arrival;

without growing old, no growing up;

without grounds for despair, no reason for hope;

so without death there can be no life.

So in the church we ought to be able to face the issue of death and dying in the light of the grace of God.

All of you, through your own experience, know that when someone you love dies, your soul goes through more than one season.

There is the season of shock; there is the season of sadness.

There is also the season of anger, when all you want to do is to beat your fists against the doors of heaven.

There is also too a season of calm and peace, one of hope; and suddenly another of loss and despair.

And they don't come in a nice orderly fashion. They come all jumbled up. One day you are sure you are going to make it, and the very next day you are equally convinced that you can't.

But if you make it through all these seasons (and most do), you gradually come to realise in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a brave and brilliant German theologian who died in Hitler's prison during World War II, that

'Nothing can make up for the absence of one we love ... it is nonsense to say that God fills the gap; God doesn't fill it, but to the contrary, God keeps it empty and so helps us keep alive our former communion with each other, even at the cost of pain.'

When someone close to you dies, the pain that is felt is the pain of losing someone you want and love. It is not because the world has suddenly become harsh and selfish toward you. **God doesn't cause these tragedies**, but is present, weeping with us, as we try to make sense of it all.

Naomi and Ruth and Orpah all went through the trauma of death. Let's look at this brilliantly written old story.

Israel was in the grip of famine; a famine that had lasted for years and finally Elimilech and his wife

Naomi and their two small sons Mahlon and Chilion decided that they must leave Bethlehem and try to make a living in Moab.

Shortly after their arrival in Moab, Elimelech died leaving Naomi a widow with two sons to bring up in a foreign land. Somehow she coped and the boys grew up and married local girls, Orpah and Ruth.

Again tragedy struck and both the boys died leaving two more widows to cope. Naomi had now lost both husband and sons and was a stranger in a foreign land with no relative to support her, other than her two daughters-in-law. She finally decided that the only hope she had was to return to her own country and town in the hope that her relatives would be able to offer some support.

She told her two daughters-in-law of her plans and said while she loved them, their best chance in life was to remain in their own country and return to their families and hope to marry again. Orpah accepted her advice and kissed her mother-in-law and returned to her family.

Ruth on the other hand wanted to remain with Naomi and clung to her. Now followed Ruth's words that have been famous for perhaps nearly 3000 years;

'Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following after you; for where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge; your people will be my people, and your God my God; where you die I will die and there I will be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if even death parts me from you.'

Even though these words were between two women, they have been used many times in weddings between couples as they make their promises to one another.

The story continues in Bethlehem as Naomi and Ruth return and struggle to make a living. Ruth gleaned in the field of Boaz to get enough to eat for herself and her mother-in-law. Much intrigue follows as Boaz notices Ruth. Naomi offers advice to her daughter-in-law, and finally Ruth and Boaz marry, and also preserve the land on which Naomi lived.

Ruth and Boaz had a son Obed, who was the father of Jesse and thus the grandfather of King David. And if you like to follow those lines further still, Jesus was of the house of David.

So here we have a classic story of tragedy and triumph over the pain of death, for these two women.

Ruth was willing to lose herself through steadfast love. Through that love, she became more than she ever thought she would be. She loved again, made a home for her mother-in-law, and gave birth to Obed.

It is good in the face of death not to let ourselves be overcome by bitterness, pain, or even sorrow, but to turn towards hope and newness of life, when we are ready and able to do so.

New life will not come to you in the same package as your former life, but it will be new life just the same.

For some of us who have lived whole lifetimes with loved ones, it is hard to turn toward a whole new life. For those of us in mid-life who have lost loved ones such as parents, the adjustment is difficult, but possible.

And for those who have loved and lost children or a spouse far too early, picking up the strands of life and beginning again is very, very difficult. But it is not impossible.

As faithful people, we know that death is not all there is. We know, as Ruth discovered, that in life and in death, we are God's.

Or as Paul puts it:

'For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.'

For the Christian, death is never the last word.

So on this day as we remember dear friends, relatives, loved ones and others who have died, may we take strength in the love that never dies, but lives on in the lives and the hearts of people.

We are a community of all the saints - those who have gone before and those present today and those who are yet to arrive.

As we come to communion, let us vow to live with kindness and serve with love.