

BEREAVED AND BEREFT

(Ruth 1.1-5 and Luke 7.11-17)

Prayer

This is a sensitive subject; we may still be raw and emotional when we remember loved ones and being bereaved.

Introduction

Our Bible passages today describe two tragic situations involving the death of spouses and children.

We will be considering what we can learn from these two stories, how Jesus can help us all at the time of loss of loved ones and guide our lives after that and how we can help others too.

The Widow at Nain

In our reading from Luke chapter 7 we hear of two crowds meeting near to the town gate at Nain - one crowd was Jesus and his disciples and followers.

The other crowd was the funeral procession.

The man who had died was "the only son of his mother and she was a widow."

St Luke wrote - "When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said. "Don't cry."

We see Jesus' compassion.

Just as in the Old Testament we read the words of the prophet Isaiah - chapter 62:

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor,

...to bind up the broken hearted.....

...to comfort all whom mourn and provide for those who grieve in Zion

To bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning."

This understanding of God's love and compassion was very different to the views of other non-Jewish faiths in the ancient world - often a harsh view of God.

Jesus was fulfilling the love of God in his words and actions and later in his death on the cross and his resurrection.

Much of Jesus' teaching emphasised that God is our loving heavenly Father.

For example he said: "look at the birds of the air they do not sow or reap or store away in barns yet your heavenly father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?"

He also said: "Even the hairs of our heads are numbered" (for some of us much more easy to count than for others!)

Power of Jesus - by his words there was the miraculous raising to life of the young man.

This was the first of 3 recorded occasions when Jesus raised dead people to life - the others being Jairus' daughter and Lazarus. In these miracles we see the compassion and love of Jesus and in the case of Lazarus it is written that Jesus wept.

Jesus is now in heaven but we know that while he has a man on earth He personally understood the pain of loss - just as it is written that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son so that all those who believe in him might have everlasting life.

On this occasion, the miracle was carried out in front of crowds so there were many witnesses to tell the story of what had happened.

We read that the people praised God and said that God has come to help his people.

Jesus was demonstrating to them his power over sin and death.

Later there was Jesus' own resurrection and after Pentecost miracles of healing and raising of the dead continued (and very rarely still do today - by the grace of God and power of the Holy Spirit).

These miracles of raising the dead in this world give us hope and assurance that we can trust Jesus' promise that all who believe in Him will have eternal life. (John 14 – "trust God; also trust in me – I go to prepare a place for you.... in my Father's house there are many rooms").

The resurrection of Jesus and the power of Jesus to bring new life after death are central to our faith as Christians.

St Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15 in detail about the importance of Jesus' resurrection and the resurrection of the dead. "Where O death is your victory? But thanks be to God he gave us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

I know of a junior doctor a number of years ago who would read 1 Corinthians 15 through at the end of every day that he had certified a patient's death. Likewise - a good chapter for us to re-read to remind us of God's promises.

Professor Sir Norman Anderson was a well-known Christian and the author of a book - "The evidence for the resurrection". His faith was sorely tested in that all his three children died as young adults. He was like a 20th century Job.

In 1970 Anderson's only son, Hugh, a brilliant young man at Cambridge University died of an inoperable brain tumour. A few days later Anderson gave his planned talk on Radio 4's thought for the day. After he explained why he was convinced that God raised Jesus from the dead he continued, "On this I am prepared to stake my life. In this faith my son died, after saying, "I'm drawing near my Lord." I am convinced that he was not mistaken.

Naomi's Husband and Two Sons

Our first reading is from the beginning of the book of Ruth. In that book we also see the love of God and his provision for Naomi and his power working in a grim situation.

The background of the book of Ruth is that it was in the time of the Judges. The last words of the book of Judges immediately before Ruth are: "In those days Israel had no king, everyone did as he saw fit."

In the time of famine Naomi's husband Elimelech chose to take his family away from Bethlehem to the country of Moab. Elimelech means "my God is king". However, paradoxically there is no reference to Elimelech or Naomi praying about this or having guidance from the Lord.

The country of Moab was outside the area that God had promised to the Israelites and the people who lived there the Moabites were known for their immorality and worship of a fertility God that included child sacrifice. Therefore it was a strange place to go to even in a time of famine. Elimelech lived up to the last words of the Book of Judges- *Everyone did as he saw fit* - there is a similarity to our days.

There is a lack of looking to God for guidance and following his will. So a challenge to us today when we are in crisis or face choices - where do we look for help?

It can be like a Multiple Choice Question. Do we:

- "phone a friend"?
- seek God's guidance?
- do as we see fit and lean on our own understanding?

Elimelech and Naomi's sons were named Mahlon and Kilion which meant sickly and poorly which presumably reflected their poor health in early life and may be a reason that they did not father children before they died. By going to the Moabite country Elimelech and Naomi isolated

themselves from their own people who would have been worshippers of God and inevitably the sons married Moabite women - Orpah and Ruth.

We are not told why Elimelech and the two sons died. When someone dies particularly suddenly we want to know the cause of death - heart or infection or cancer...

Also we may ask the deeper question why particularly when someone is young and serving the Lord.

Linda and I remember a young Mission Aviation Fellowship pilot who was a really helpful man - once when visiting he assembled a flat pack bike for one of our sons (a real blessing as I am not good at DIY). The next week we heard that the plane that he was piloting crashed killing him and the two doctors whom he was transporting. We do not know the reasons why that happened any more than we know why Elimelech and the two sons died.

However, Naomi was in the very sad situation of being a widow, both adult sons dying and living in a foreign land. As we read through the book of Ruth we see how God blesses Naomi with the friendship of Ruth, his provision for them and how Ruth becomes the great grandmother of King David. His compassion and power were working.

However at this initial period of time Naomi would have been suffering the acute bereavement of the loss of her sons after the death of her husband.

Working in Accident and Emergency, I have been with many relatives after the death of loved ones. Often the deaths are sudden and unexpected. People do vary enormously in how they are initially with reactions including anger, denial and numbness.

Those who are most distressed are those who have lost children. There is not a lot that can be said to take away the severe grief. However, staff and friends being there for people does help. The support of chaplains can be helpful for people whether they have faith or not.

The bereavement process takes time and just as initial reactions to a loss vary from person to person longer term bereavement varies from person to person too.

As believers we can be supportive by;

- Being there for those who have lost loved ones- that may include sitting quietly – like Job’s comforters did- in the early stages at least – in African culture people come and camp outside the houses of the bereaved to be there to maximise support and also bring food.
- Giving practical help.
- Being faithful in prayer.
- Reminding believers of the Resurrection of Jesus and the certainty that we have of eternal life for those who trust in him.
- Being there for the long haul whilst people mourn loved ones- sticking with them as they journey through their grief and being patient with people.

In the book of Ruth we see how Ruth did this.

As well other believers standing with us we can be sure that God is journeying with us. Jesus said “Surely I am with you until the very end of the age.” And in Deuteronomy God promised his people, “The Lord your God goes with you, he never leaves you or forsakes you.”

Some of us will be asking the question why did this happen or why me or why us - we should not feel guilty if we feel that way - and we do need time and support to think and pray this through. When we read the Psalms and the book of Job we read these questions too.

Professor Anderson whom I referred to earlier was asked in later life, “When you look back over your life and reflect on the fact that you have lost all your three children and now your wife of over 60 years no longer recognises you do you ever ask the question “Why me?”

"No I have never asked that question but I have asked the question "Why not me?" I am not promised as a Christian that I will escape the problems encountered by others; we all live in a fallen world... I am however promised that in the midst of difficulties, God through Christ will be present with me and will give his grace to help me cope with the difficulties and be a witness to him."

Dr Martyn Lloyd Jones once said, "Don't let those things that we don't know spoil those things that we do know."

So in conclusion – let us remember the compassion and love of Jesus and his power to work at times of loss.

We do know that Jesus has overcome death and that as St Paul wrote in Romans 8.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Let us pray...