

Saints and Widows

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church on November 7th, 2021 - Mark 12:38-44 & Ruth 3:1 – 4: 17)

Today we celebrate All Saints Day which occurred earlier this week on November 1st. This is the time we remember ordinary people who did extraordinary things for God. These people did the best they could to live out their love for God, to live lives following the two great commandments – love God with your entire being and love your neighbour as yourself. This kind of living Jesus says brings us close to the kingdom.

It is true some of these people we have called saints did both ordinary and bizarre things. They dared to believe Jesus was the Son of God, they dared to do things differently and it would be true to say many struggled to live out their faith, just like you and I. We know St. Francis liked to preach to the birds, the crickets and the wolves. St. Simeon the Stylite spent thirty years perched on his pillar which was about sixty feet high. Joan of Arc, a woman, led her country into battle and then was burnt at the stake as a witch. Martin Luther King Jr was killed as he preached and Oscar Romero as he celebrated communion, both as a consequence of loving their neighbour and speaking up for them. Sainthood might lead to a messy end, indeed the first martyr, Saint Stephen was killed for his faith.

I think we could add to the list, the three widows we have in our readings today.

I don't know about you but I have met some extraordinary widows in my time. They have been strong women, resilient women, wise women, compassionate women, capable women. I am hoping you know some of these as well.

God in the bible calls the people to especially care for the widows and for good reason. Widows, especially those without children had very few options – they didn't own land, they had little income and there was no social welfare system. Jesus tells us that lawyers or scribes would often exploit these widows.

Ruth and Naomi's story continues from last week. When we met them last week, they were adrift, having lost husbands they find themselves heading back to Naomi's home town Bethlehem.

Without husbands or fathers they needed to find a way to provide for themselves. There was a rule that if they could find a distant relative, that relative could take over the property of the dead men, property of course meant women as well back then. Naomi discovers there is such a man and embarks on a plan to see if that might be a way of ensuring their future.

Ruth had been gleaning the extra wheat after the pickers had been through to provide for them, this was allowed under the law and was a way of providing for the poor.

Naomi shares her plan with Ruth and true to form she does as Naomi asks and approaches Boaz. The story has some innuendo and seduction. Boaz had heard about how Ruth, a foreigner, had returned with Naomi and done all she could to look after Naomi. He was impressed with her loyalty. Eventually Boaz agrees to take them in, so long as the other relative who was more closely related chose not to take up this option. It appears the other relative doesn't want to take on the two women, so Boaz does and marries Ruth and provides for them both. They then have a son called Obed which

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brings much joy to the whole community. Ruth is hardworking, loyal, obedient – someone to emulate. Naomi is at the very least ingenuous.

Our other widow is in the temple making her offering. She follows after the important and rich people who make a big show of this ritual. I am sure as the money fell into the bowl it echoed through the temple. The widow approaches quietly, perhaps a bit embarrassed, then quickly places her two coins into the bowl, no great splash but she is sure people have noticed how little she has put in. Despite her gift being so much less than the others, Jesus counts this as being greater than the offerings of others. Her offering was a significant sacrifice, she gave sacrificially whilst the others were just giving. Her self-giving mirrors the kind of giving we find both in God and Jesus.

These three widows are extraordinary examples for us. Examples of giving all they had, examples of generosity, examples of giving to God out of their poverty. They are part of the great company of saints surrounding us on every side, cheering us on in our journey of faith. They are commended to us by God and Jesus as ones we should imitate.

Saints come in all colours, shapes, ages and genders. They are simply people who love and serve God. They are courageous, generous and love. They are our mentors in the faith and should be our heroes. We are connected to them, they are our inspiration. They are part of the great cloud of witnesses cheering us on as we run the race before us.

Let us spend our lives doing as they did – working hard and diligently, giving of ourselves, being generous with our time, our talents and our very selves. Let's be part of this motley crew. Let us give thanks for and celebrate them and their influence on our lives. Amen.