

**Sermon Notes from CMJ**  
24th Sunday after Pentecost – Year B

**RCL Readings** – Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17; Psalm 127; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44

**ACNA Readings** – 1 Kings 17:8-16; Psalm 146; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44

**Introduction.** We sometimes make religion and faith more complicated than it should be. We can end up spending a great deal of time and effort fine-tuning our dogmas, liturgies, or worship services – all of which can be good and very important but also sometimes distracting. An honest and humble walk with the Lord shows itself in simple, practical ways. James says that pure and undefiled religion is taking care of orphans and widows (Jas 1:27).

**Common Theme.** Widows feature prominently in many of our readings this week. The Scriptures reveal the value, the service, and the blessings that come from some of the weakest members of society. God keeps a careful eye on the poor and lowly. He is a ‘father of the fatherless, a defender of widows’ (Ps 68:5).

**Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17.** Boaz had been kind to Naomi and Ruth during the harvest time. They are not strangers to each other by now, and Naomi knew that Boaz was in a position to be the kinsman redeemer. The *goel*, or kinsman redeemer, had a variety of responsibilities in Jewish society. According to the Torah, he had the responsibility to purchase Israelites out of slavery, purchase land that had been forfeited, avenge the blood of innocents, and also had the responsibility to marry childless widows to preserve the family line. Naomi is a widow. This status marks her on the fringe of society. She is vulnerable and financially insecure. Apparently, widows also wore special clothing that signified their status. Genesis 38:19 has Tamar wearing the special garments of widows, and it is possible that this custom was in operation during the time of the Judges. The incident of Judah and Tamar provides good background to the story of Ruth and Boaz. Both couples are in the lineage of King David. In this passage, we see Naomi instruct Ruth – also a widow (Ruth 1:4-5) – in how to appeal to Boaz to act on her behalf as the *goel* of the family. Ruth is to go to the threshing floor at night – fresh, clean, and smelling great, yet unseen – and ‘uncover the feet’ of Boaz. The phrase does have some potential sexual overtones. The word ‘feet’ can refer to something other than someone’s foot, however the text does not imply immorality between Boaz and Ruth. Boaz proceeds to act as the kinsman redeemer, purchasing the family's land and acquiring Ruth as a wife.

The gift of children is not taken for granted in antiquity, thus the text acknowledges that the conception of a son came from the Lord. Naomi the widow is now considered ‘Blessed by the Lord’ through the life of Ruth and Boaz’ son. The son is named Oved, which means ‘servant’ in Hebrew. This is a great story of service, devotion and loyalty even in the midst of poverty. Though they were a poor widow and a foreign (Moabite) daughter-in-law, the love and faithfulness of Naomi and Ruth bring ultimate blessing to the people of Israel. The return of Naomi and Ruth to Bethlehem results in a grandson for Naomi. Oved will become the grandfather of King David, a connection that will later send Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem to bring forth the Kinsman Redeemer of us all – Jesus.

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**Psalm 127.** Solomon is more known for his wisdom literature, the Song of Songs and Proverbs, than he is for his psalms. Only two psalms – Psalms 72 and 127 – are attributed to Solomon. The house that the Lord builds is the main theme in this song of ascent. The ‘house’ has a twofold meaning: the temple, which is the destination point for the pilgrims who are chanting this prayer, and the family, which was and still is the most important and essential social structure in Middle Eastern culture. Solomon oversaw the construction of the first temple in Jerusalem. He could see the value of human skill and hard work as the building took shape, but he also knew the final product would hold little to no value unless the Lord was in the project. Without the Lord then everything is ultimately in vain, as stressed in the book of Ecclesiastes. Humans are commanded by God to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth. With our present day, below-replacement-level birth rates this is not going to be accomplished. Some people view children as detrimental to the future of the planet, but not so with Solomon. Children are a heritage from the Lord; they are a gift and not a burden. Solomon even goes further and says they are a reward from the Lord. A strong family can provide immeasurable nurture and support for the next generation. The family bond is further strengthened by the presence of the Lord and his Spirit.

**Hebrews 9:24-28.** The writer of Hebrews continues to remind us of the ‘once for all’ sacrifice of Jesus. The sacrifice and death of Jesus is efficacious due to the resurrection of the Lord, who enters the Holy Place in heaven. The once-for-all offering of the Messiah is contrasted with the yearly offering of the high priest on Yom Kippur, who must return and make offerings ‘again and again’. If Jesus was like the earthly priests, then he would have to offer himself repeatedly, as well. Everyone is appointed to die once, and that includes Jesus. His one-time sacrifice was made here on earth, but his continuing work as mediator in heaven is ongoing. The return of the Messiah is not to deal with sin again. That aspect of the divine promise has been fulfilled and dealt with. Thus the second coming will not have the same reconciliation-forgiveness character of his first appearance but will bring judgment as well as salvation and rescue from the injustices of this broken world to those who early await him. The author of Hebrews writes about our eagerness for the Messiah’s return. Maintaining a sense of eagerness and expectation is not always easy amongst the pressures and responsibilities of day-to-day life. Many of our liturgies contain the words, ‘Come, Lord Jesus,’ so that the expectation of our Redeemer and King is never far from our devotion to the Lord.

**Mark 12:38-44.** Jesus has a sharp rebuke for the Bible scholars of his day. Sometimes called scribes and sometimes the teachers of the Law, they were the custodians of the Scriptures and were entrusted to learn, preserve, and teach the Word of the Lord to the people of God. That is essentially the same task the current shepherds of the Church have. It is an incredible job to have, and it should have been a humbling and awe-inspiring task for the scribes. Instead, it appears to have produced hypocrites more obsessed with their own self-importance and seeking all the perks of their status in the community. The Torah, with which they had been entrusted to guard and teach, should have taught them God’s concern for the poor, the stranger, and the widow. Instead, they oppressed those they should have liberated. Jesus

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warns against the sorts of scribes and teachers who parade themselves in fine clothing, say long-winded prayers to display their piety, and are so greedy as to seize the resources of the truly needy. The Gospel of Mark immediately contrasts the falseness of these so-called teachers with the humility and true devotion of the nameless widow. The widow loves the Lord with all that she possesses, even if that is not much. She has fulfilled the command from last week's lectionary reading, to love the Lord with all your heart and soul and strength. The teachers of the Law had become distracted, loving themselves and forgetting the spirit of the Law. We should learn from this passage that Jesus looks at how we serve others and with what intention we give to the work of the Church and to the poor. The Lord observes our heart and motives. The spirit of giving determines its real value. God does not need our money (although the programs of the Church, the mission work around the world, hospitals, and schools, etc., all require real financial support). What God desires is the true heart of the worshipper who can serve in their poverty and not out of their abundance. In this way, we can all serve the Lord in spirit and in truth. A widow like Naomi can bring forth the Redeemer, and another nameless widow can show us true devotion of giving and generosity.

### **ACNA Readings**

**1 Kings 17:8-16.** God moves the prophet Elijah from the land of Israel north to a Gentile city near Sidon. The Lord informs Elijah, who had previously been cared for miraculously by ravens, that now a widow will provide for him. This must have been an interesting thing for Elijah to hear as widows were not known for their wealth in antiquity. The widow may even have been a Gentile. While the text does not specifically reveal her ethnic background, it can be inferred. She calls the Lord ‘your God’, hinting that she is not a worshipper of the Lord. Jesus mentions this event in Luke 4:25, but he does not reveal her ethnicity (although many commentators say the context suggests she is a Gentile).<sup>1</sup> When Elijah encounters the widow, he makes a bold request for assistance. The widow is preparing what she believes to be her last meal. Yet, in her poverty, she shares what meagre resources she has with the prophet. Elijah had to trust the Lord to go to a Gentile region and be provided for by a poor widow. The widow had to take a risk and trust the promises of a strange prophet and the God of Israel. Which one had to trust more, do you think?

**Psalm 146.** This psalm begins the final five songs in the Book of Psalms that have become known as the Hallelujah Psalms. Each of the final five psalms begins and ends with the imperative ‘Hallelujah’, that is, ‘praise the Lord!’ It is possible that the word ‘hallelujah’ was called out loudly by a priest or Levite in the temple as a signal for the gathered worshippers to actually start worshipping in either song or prayers. The psalm urges us not to look at the wealthy, the princes, and great people in our society as bastions of hope and trust. Wealth can indeed be a blessing from the Lord, and we should all treat our

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the area of Tyre and Sidon falls under the allotted portion of land assigned to the tribe of Asher. It is most likely that Jesus visits these Jewish communities when he goes to the region, as described in the Gospels (Mark 7:24, cf. Luke 10:14).

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24th Sunday after Pentecost – Year B

possessions as a gift from God and use our riches for his glory. The psalm reminds us that God keeps his eyes on the lowly, the stranger, and the widow. Those on the fringe of society and who are often overlooked are not ignored by the Lord. If this is the Lord's attitude to the poor and to the oppressed – to bring them relief, justice and kindness – then, as followers of the Lord, it should become our attitude too. Our eyes should not be on the celebrities of society, and our trust is not in human governments nor science. Our trust should be in the Lord, and we should look to see who and what he is concerned for. Governments and celebrities will come and go, but the Lord will remain forever.

**About the author.** The Rev. Aaron Eime is the deacon at Christ Church Jerusalem and teacher for CMJ Israel. Aaron studied in the master's program at Hebrew University with a focus on early Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Bible. He also studied psychology and sociology at Queensland University in Australia. Aaron is a dedicated Bible teacher exploring the Hebraic roots of the Christian faith. He reads Aramaic and ancient Greek and is fluent in German and Hebrew. He has taught internationally, including in Europe, North America, Hong Kong, and China. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and three children.