**Printed material for Sunday 31st October 2021**

**Compiled by Mrs Barbara Spencer.**

As we gather out thoughts, we devote this time and space to God, our heavenly Father who is faithful and steadfast in his love for us.

**Hymn:** 79 (StF) I‘ll praise my Maker while I’ve breath:<https://youtu.be/s7BB6kArmoI> (Psalm 146)

**Prayers:** Loving Lord, we worship and adore you. We marvel at the magnitude and complexity of your creation and yet you care for each of us. We give you thanks and praise for all that you are and for the bountiful gifts you have given to us... We praise you for the times when we see your love in action, sometimes in surprising times and places… and we are sorry for those occasions when we have failed to recognise it. We are sorry, too, for those times when we grumble about trivial things or fail to use our gifts and talents for your family and kingdom… Forgive us Lord and enable us to flourish in your love, seeing the possibilities that arise for us to proclaim your love for the world in thought, word, and deed... Help us to be true disciples of Jesus who taught us about your eternal and unconditional love for all. Help us not to be misled by the ways of the world when they are at odds with what you desire. Loving God, may we be more confident that, no matter the circumstances in which we find ourselves, you are with us and love us. Let us always remember that Jesus was guided by love and not regulations devised by people. May we respond and love you and your family with all our being. In the name of Jesus, our teacher and Saviour. Amen.

**The Lord’s Prayer**

**Readings:** Ruth 1: 1-18; Mark 12: 28-34

**Hymn:** 611 (StF) Brother, sister, let me serve you: <https://youtu.be/EQaOErUUjm8>

The story of Naomi’s circumstances could easily be written now. Migration and immigration are contemporary subjects. Our TV’s portray desperate people fleeing from their homes because of war, persecution, or famine. The majority are on foot, walking over inhospitable terrain, in all weathers, and encountering unwelcoming people. They are subject to various kinds of exploitation. Even more heart breaking is seeing the particularly vulnerable ones trudging along as best they can. Sometimes they are helped on their way by well-meaning people and charities. Imagine the circumstances that would make you take such a journey. How are food and water obtained and where to sleep?

Moab was situated on the east side of the Red Sea. The Moabites and Israelites were often at war with one another but at the time of Naomi there was peace. There was a famine where Naomi lived in Bethlehem and her husband decided that the family would make the journey to Moab country. There are various estimates of the distance, but it is 50 miles or so over rugged terrain. Imagine how difficult it must have been when her husband died. Women had no status and so her bereavement was not just for Elimelech. Her sons married local women, which must have helped her situation, but then they died too! It is understandable that she would want to return home, where she could practise her religion and be with her own people. Widows were expected to re-marry, hence her exhortation to her daughters-in-law. Orpah went back but Ruth stayed. Not only did Ruth refuse to accept the arguments but she demonstrated her love for Naomi by clinging to her and taking her religion. She was not going to allow Naomi to be miserable on her own (Naomi changed her name to Mara, bitter). Ruth’s actions and words are powerful. She makes a commitment to Naomi and to God. Naomi is convinced that it is God who has brought about her suffering yet there is Ruth, helping her through and when they arrive in Bethlehem the famine is over. It must be recognised that Ruth is a widow too! As the story continues to unfold Naomi comes to realise God’s blessing for both of them.

Ruth was faithful and patient. Her commitment and loyalty to her mother-in-law were paramount. Such attributes seem to be a bit thin on the ground in our modern world. There is a wealth of stories that we see and read which discount loyalty. Leaks of information are commonplace, even if they are not accurate. There is little thought of consequence. Patience, too, is hard to find. Everything needs to be provided/done instantly, regardless of the cost to other people. Stress and mental ill-health are more prevalent than ever and for all kinds of reasons. It is easy for some to align themselves with Naomi and think that God has forsaken them. However, Ruth’s determination and patience proved otherwise, and so it is now. It would have been so easy for her to say, “if that’s how you feel, I’m going!” Some would say you can’t help the people who don’t want to be helped” – the grumpies of this world! Ruth, on the other hand, is amazing, and she does not accept “the common sense” way. Hers is the response of love, with no expectation of reward. Is that a lesson for us?

There are countless stories of generosity, love for friend and stranger, commitment to answering need and so on, of God working in all kinds of situations. It is worth remembering part of Julian of Norwich’s quotation, “All shall be well…” and that God’s time and purpose may not be the same as ours! However, we still need to take responsibility for our actions.

Jesus was being tested by the Scribes and Pharisees as they tried to catch him out. In today’s reading one of the Scribes had heard the debates and was impressed. In Mark’s version he appears to have been genuinely interested and not challenging Jesus. Jesus answered his question by quoting the Shema, the Jewish daily prayer from Deuteronomy 6: 4-5 and Leviticus 19:18. The Scribe agrees and recognises that love for God and neighbour outweighs any burnt offerings and sacrifices. Many Jews would have agreed and practised that teaching but some of the religious authorities of the time had lost the focus and given more weight to tradition; sacrifices and ritual had taken precedence. Jesus says that attitude towards God and neighbour is more important than religiosity. Love, faithfulness, commitment to and for God, neighbour and oneself are drivers – and so, back to Ruth – but all these attributes were, and are, demonstrated by Jesus in his teaching, way of life, death, and resurrection – and all because of you, me, and our families, friends, neighbours, and strangers. Jesus gave us selfless and unconditional love. He cared about the loveless and the outcast. He recognised the ones who didn’t fit in or were vulnerable and described how they are neighbours too. He ran the gauntlet of befriending those who were looked down upon by society, especially by some of the religious leaders. How then to respond? Do *our* rituals, traditions, or attitudes get in the way? Do we fear changing any of it even if it hinders someone from coming to know Jesus? How *do* we love God, then our neighbour and ourselves? What are the barriers? The Scribes and Pharisees thought that by obeying the laws ritually they were doing the right thing. The Scribe in the story realised that obeying the laws did not necessarily mean that they loved God. In recognising that fact Jesus told him he was not far from the kingdom of God. The Scribe was prepared to listen to Jesus and keep an open mind. Some of the difficulties that we have in society are because people no longer want to listen to another point of view. Their minds are closed, and they want to push for their own agenda. Christians have been, and sometimes are, guilty of that too. It can become exclusive and undervalue other people. Jesus’ message is that God’s love is for all! God first, his people second – their welfare in all its forms matters. Accept God’s love, no strings: “Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all”, StF 287.

**Prayers of intercession: Hymn:** 693 (StF) Beauty for brokenness: <https://youtu.be/SxfBh9ay8gE>

Loving and gracious God help us to be more alert to the needs of others; to see what we can do to bring them your love. Help us to listen to you and to them; to be determined and patient for your kingdom…

Lord, we pray:

For the people we know who are suffering or having a difficult time…

For those who feel the need to flee from their own lands because of war, famine, persecution...

For victims of prejudice, hatred, injustice, of homelessness, climate change and natural disaster…

For perpetrators of violence and injustice that they will change their ways and value other people…

For all who are making a difference for the better, for the leaders of nations and communities...

For our families, friends, and neighbours…

For our church and for the church family worldwide, that your gospel of love will be proclaimed and enacted… and we pray for the Christians being persecuted for their faith; may they remain steadfast…

Faithful and compassionate God, accept the prayers we offer. Give us the strength and perseverance we need. May your Spirit enlighten and enable us to be your voice and enabler and to see the possibilities for your ways of being and working. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

**Hymn:** 156 (StF) From the breaking of the dawn: <https://youtu.be/kMuq5z1uaMo> or 503 (StF) Love divine

**Benediction:** “For thee delightfully employ whate’er thy bounteous grace has given, and run the course with even joy, and closely walk with thee to heaven.”

Maywe go in the grace and love of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.