

Ruth 3

Psalm 127

Mark 12. 38-44

When I was involved in the Presbytery as chairperson, I had dealings with a particular congregation which was on the brink of a merger with another congregation and consequently significant change. There was a key leader of that congregation who insisted that all the church needed was better management – ministers should get out of the way and allow people with management experience to run the show. All that was needed for the successful merger of the two congregations was a good management process was his view! People would see the logic of it all and fall into line. From experience I could tell him that nothing could be further from the truth.

An amalgamation of four congregations I was involved in a decade ago has continued to be a place of deep conflict and distress: a lot of money spent on a new house, a lot of distressed people moving away from the congregation, a lot of conflict and significant ministerial stress and bad behaviour by others in the wider church, has been the legacy. We hoped the Lord was building the house. In hindsight it certainly doesn't feel like it.

Very soon the house which was built at Ormond Uniting Church will be demolished. And then another house will be built. So many of our churches and church buildings proclaim on their foundation stones: "To the glory of God!" I always wonder whether God was pleased about this. Or simply felt a bit over-managed.

Unless the Lord builds the house,
those who build it labour in vain.

This Psalm impressed itself upon me in my early 30s when I was in a stage of reconsidering my life. It was a word of caution to me that if I was seeking the will and the inspiration of the eternal God, I shouldn't be too overconfident about the path I may end up choosing. Behind these two simple lines is the affirmation that God is present and active in the world, in personal lives, in human affairs. And behind it also lies the inference that we, together, may participate with God in the shaping of the world out of divine inspiration. What would a collective life, a collective project look like where God was discerned to be present and active in what people were seeking to do together?

Over the last thirteen years you have worked your way toward embodying a new vision for this church. It has been a long, protracted and expensive journey – both financially and in terms of energy and simply years of your lives. You are all thirteen years older than when you began going down this path. You very deliberately considered what you would do with your buildings: nothing, a bit of a tart-up or aim for an ambitious redevelopment which would be framed within an inspired vision for the church in this place. I wonder to myself in all these delays and twists and

turns, is the Lord still in this? Is the Spirit still at work? I believe so. But you are different, changed, wiser, maybe a bit more cynical, older and needing to expend your energy more carefully.

One of the mysteries of the life of the church is the way in which it has survived, thrived, been passed on over two millennia. How it has been picked up by new generations and carried and spread. This handing-on is not over, although all of us are uncertain about what the future might look like and how to give birth to it. Maybe we need a bit of IVF.

One of the management tactics of the church over the past six decades, as congregations have shrunk and become financially unviable, has been to amalgamate – to subject the church to economic rationalist decisions about its future. To manage the decline! These have not been life-giving decisions in the main, but managerial accommodations to an economic imperative. Was the spirit in these decisions, I wonder? Was God discerned to be present? In hindsight, too often not.

Many of the stories of scripture give us accounts of people who were over-confident about God's involvement in what they were doing. Only to discover that God was not. The background to the story of Ruth would be one such story. The writers of Joshua and Judges, Samuel and Kings wrote in ways that proclaimed that God was involved in the bloody battles of the tribes of Israel – annihilating their enemies in the name of the Lord. The story of Ruth – placed in the midst of those bellicose books - tells a story of a despised foreigner, seducing her way into the house of Israel and becoming the great-grandmother of the celebrated King David.

The gospel reading for today is set in the days before Jesus' crucifixion. He has arrived in Jerusalem and Mark portrays a stand-off with the temple cult. Jesus has just cleared the temple forecourt, driving out traders and money changers. Everyone is paying attention. The scribes who Jesus denounces are at the heart of the temple system – they benefit from a system which bleeds widows dry. For a long time scholars have suggested that in the passage we have heard Jesus is honouring the widow's piety. Her virtue, her devotion was greater than the scribes, although she gave very little, was the interpretation of what is going on. More recently they are of a mind that Jesus' singling out of the widow is a denunciation of the house that the temple system has built. They devour widow's houses – all for the sake of saying long prayers. As he sits down opposite the temple, Jesus sits in judgement of its self-preoccupation, its corruption, its blindness to the law and the prophets which call for the protection of the widow, the outcast, the stranger.

In a few days, as Jesus is tried and then hangs on the cross, one of the accusations that is made against him is: We heard him say, "I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands." While Jesus never actually says this in Mark's gospel, the image is that the temple will be replaced with Jesus broken body. This will be site of the glory and worship of God. Not the temple built with human hands, human hubris, human ego, human limitation on the mercy of God. But in the body of this broken, humble, human one – as Mark calls Jesus. This house of God is built in the son. The calling of the church is to build a house in the pattern of this. In human hearts and broken bodies. This is the paschal mystery, the Easter mystery.

Shortly the Ormond church will be strangely exposed. Everything apart from the church will be pulled down and there will be a cyclone wire fence put up all around much of it. It will look strange; stick out like a sore thumb. Visually the church will be in a kind of cage for all to see.

We'll come and go and continue our life through this time as we continue to pray, to plan and prepare for something new. Truly you'll be plunged into a significant liminal space. We may well ask: is the Lord in this place?

The PCG met together with the new architects face to face for the first time this week. We had their suggested plans spread out on a table here and they asked what activities have you got planned for these spaces. My first response to this question was to be deflated: well there's not much going on at present. And then I recognised that this planning and anticipation for new space has plunged you into a liminal space. You have neither been able to go forward nor go back. I know that within you lies hope and inspiration for new things. In all this limbo, though, it is nigh impossible to embody it in place. I said to the architects that this is how it is here, that you have been in suspension. And this, no question, is difficult.

In a time of grief or of mourning it's hard to do anything much. We are plunged into a form of suspension, where what was, has died and what the future will look like, we are not certain about. This is a hard place to be. But it is the place to be. There is no other. Big and hasty decisions are a mistake in such a time. And this liminal space is not just Ormond's but it is the whole church's liminal space – the end of 1700 years of Christendom. We shouldn't feel guilty about what we are caught up in.

We don't know what the future will hold. We are not called to secure the future. We are only called to be faithful. To see Christ in the face of the vulnerable, in each other, in the least of these. We are called to make space for the spirit of God, to have flesh put on her and to show God in our bodies as Jesus showed God in his broken body. This is our calling, this is our commission, in faithfulness to this we can trust that the house will be built and God will be seen.

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