

Justice for Women

Series: Like a Mighty River: the Bible on Justice

Date: 19 September 2021, 16th Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: Genesis 38:1-26; Ruth 3:1-14; Mark 10:42-45; 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

Over the past 3 weeks we've been looking at what the Bible has to say on Justice. Today we're looking at the topic of Justice for Women. Since the #MeToo movement in 2017 in the Western world we've been particularly conscious of sexual harassment and abuse of women. This has come home to us this year with Tasmania's own Grace Tame named Australian of the year for her advocacy for survivors of sexual assault. Then Brittany Higgins came forward to tell her story of allegedly being raped by a staffer in Parliament House. A 2016 survey by the Australian Bureau of Statistics found that 23% of women said that they had experienced violence by an intimate partner. Annabell Crabb's superb documentary on the history of women in Australian parliaments *Misrepresented* shone a spotlight on the sexism and discrimination women face at the highest level in Australia. Culturally we have a problem with how men treat women. Sometimes it's just the little things. Claire often reminds me that women's jeans have fake pockets for example, because why would they need real ones?

Lest we think that that's just out in the world, this year I was deeply upset to learn that one of my favourite apologists Ravi Zacharias, who died last year, had been a sexual predator throughout his ministry. In April the Anglican Church in Australia released its findings into the prevalence of Domestic and Family Violence in the Anglican church. It found that in the past year 17% of women in the church had experienced some form of intimate partner violence. 23% of women and 5% of men had experience sexual violence in their lifetime. 30% of women and 15% of men experienced *harassment* in their lifetime. We have a problem with men mistreating women in the church too. Those statistics mean that some of you have suffered harassment and abuse. There is justice to be done. We need that *mishpat*, rectifying justice, and *sedāqa*, restoring relationships. We want church to be a place where people find *shalom*, peace and wholeness.

So, what does the Bible have to teach us on this subject of Justice for Women. As I ask that question some people may say that the Bible is part of the problem. People have told me that the Bible is a patriarchal and misogynistic text that has been used to oppress women through the centuries. Yes, the Bible can be used as a weapon against women, and tragically, and wickedly has been. But I would suggest that that's not the fault of the Bible itself, it's the fault of the person using it as a weapon. Rather, I would argue that the Bible has great

resources to critique the mistreatment of women, to empower women, and to show men how to treat women with dignity and respect. We've been reading through Judges with our kids, and what I've noticed is that these stories are so powerful in shaping our moral and spiritual imaginations. So this morning I want to explore this topic of justice for women by looking at 2 stories from the Old Testament - Tamar and Judah in Genesis 38 and Ruth and Boaz in the book of Ruth.

I recognise that this is a huge topic, beyond one sermon. I've chosen to focus on men using women's bodies as I think that lies at the heart of this issue. I feel like what I've written for today is wholly inadequate. I hope it's a start. I know that I still have lots to learn, and I'm so thankful for some of the women in my life who continue to teach me so much in this area. My Mum, who I always remember telling me about the particular vulnerabilities of women in the cultures she was working in. Claire, who always challenges me in this area and makes me listen and read. And women here who I've learned so much from in hearing your stories.

Created and Fallen Realities

Before we come to Tamar and Ruth, I want to briefly touch on the realities of the creation and the fall that set the stage for our experience of the world as women and men. Beneath all the Bible's teaching on justice lies the fundamental declaration in chapter 1 of the Bible that God has made humanity, male and female in his image and likeness. This theological conviction is the reason why all people regardless of their differences are to be treated with respect and dignity. All people are equally made by God, bear his image, and are loved by God. Second, we are made male and female. These biological realities shape our experience of the world and how we see things. Yet this fundamental duality in the human race does not undermine or negate that primary equality before God and each other as image bearers. What's more, we need each other. Women and men are not made to be at war. We are all, however, also equally fallen. The story of Genesis 3 is that where there was meant to be harmony and mutual dependence between the sexes now there is mistrust, conflict, blame, and shame.

In 1 Peter 3.7 Peter tells husbands to, "be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life". For my money Peter highlights here something that is generally (though not always) the case that women are physically weaker and more vulnerable than men. What are husbands to do with the relative position of power? Be considerate. Treat their wives with respect. After all they are co-heirs, equal with their husbands before God in redemption. This I suggest is a little window into the inescapable reality of power relations. There are differences of power in all relationships. That biological reality of men's muscle mass and women's reproductive cycle

has meant that through the ages and across cultures men are more often in positions of power and women in positions of vulnerability.

Tamar and Ruth

That brings us to Tamar and Ruth. Behind both of these stories lies what scholars call the law of levirate marriage. You can find it in Deuteronomy 25. This law said that if a man got married and died before producing a son, his brother had to marry the widow. We might find this law odd, but in ancient Israel it made a lot of sense. In a society where kinship meant the difference between life and death, without a husband to protect her or sons to provide for her in her old age, a woman was in a highly vulnerable position. She could starve. She might be kidnapped and sold, or worse. The book of Ruth hints at this. When Ruth finds herself gleaning in Boaz's field, Boaz tells her to not glean in another field. He says, "I've told the men not to lay a hand on you."¹ Her mother-in-law Naomi also says that it will be good for her to go with the women who work for Boaz, "because in someone else's field you might be harmed."² But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's have a look at Tamar and Judah first. Let me summarise the story.

Judah has 3 sons. The oldest marries Tamar. But he dies. The second marries her but refuses to give her a son and so also dies. Judah then tells her to live in his household and wait till his third son grows up so he can marry her. But Judah thinks the third son might die, so he reneges on his promise. So Tamar hatches a plan. She disguises herself as a prostitute. Judah sees her on the road and sleeps with her, leaving his belt and staff as pledge for the goat he offers her in payment for her services. 3 months later Judah discovers Tamar is pregnant. He is furious, presumably because she has brought shame upon his house. He brings her out to burn her to death. But she sends the staff and belt with this message: "the owner of these made me pregnant". Judah thus finds his sin exposed and says, "She is more righteous than I".

It's an icky story. But I'm so glad that this story and others like it are in the Bible. Because they show us that God sees and knows injustices done. In the pages of the Bible women who've been used like Tamar have a voice and a place in his story. Judah wrongs Tamar in all sorts of ways. In the first place he doesn't let his 3rd son marry her. He's thinking only of himself and his family, not this widow who is under his care. Denying her this provision leaves her vulnerable to poverty and abuse. Judah further wrongs her by committing adultery and incest, both of which the law forbids. He is led by his appetites and then hypocritically

¹ Ruth 2.9

² Ruth 2.22

rages against Tamar when her “indiscretion” becomes obvious. Tamar uses perhaps the only power she has, her sexuality, to secure the justice Judah owes her, even though this means moral compromise. In the end Judah recognises this and names her as more righteous than he. And, it seems he repents. The text says that he did not sleep with her again.³ Tamar’s story exposes the hypocrisy of men who use their power to abuse women and deny them justice.

Her story reminds me of 1 Thessalonians 4.

It is God’s will that you ... should avoid sexual immorality; **4** that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, **5** not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God; **6** and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister.

We often hear that Christian sexual ethics - that sex is only for husband and wife in marriage - as repressive and cutting across our freedom. But did you notice how St Paul speaks about it in verse 6? As a matter of justice. People can be taken advantage of in the bedroom.

Two of the greatest idols in our culture are greed and sex. Greed is expressed in our marriage to the market. Here everything, human beings included, is reduced to commodities that can be bought or sold. Put sex through the filter of the market and you get pornography. Unless as a society we tackle the scourge of pornography we will not make real headway on culture wide justice for women. Just as a side note, if you watch porn, you need to stop. You’re not alone. Have a chat with me or someone you trust and get some help.

That boundary of marriage is there to protect people from being exploited. And second, we are called to control our bodies in a way that is holy and honorable, *for the sake of the other*. That applies in marriage just as much as outside of it. Marriage is not a license to wrong your spouse in the bedroom. Sex is about mutual self giving, with both parties saying yes.

Ruth and Boaz

If the story of Tamar was one of men behaving badly, the story of Ruth is the opposite. If you haven’t read Ruth, please do! It’s one of the absolute gems of the Bible. We’ll visit it again next week. But for those who haven’t read it, let me try and summarise the story as it pertains to today’s topic. We pick up the story in chapter 2 where the widow Naomi returns home to Bethlehem during the harvest. Her sons have died but her daughter-in-law from Moab, Ruth, goes with her. You might remember those 4 categories of vulnerable people in the Bible - the poor, the widow, the orphan and the immigrant. Well, Ruth fits three of those. They need to eat, so Ruth goes to glean. She finds herself gleaning in the field of Boaz. Boaz

³ Genesis 38.26

generously provides for Ruth and Naomi, and it turns out he is a kinsman-redeemer. That is he is a relative of Naomi's dead husband. Under Jewish law the job of kinsman-redeemer was to do 2 things - marry the widow of a deceased relative, as we saw earlier, and buy their property. Both of these would provide for the vulnerable widow.

Many of the elements of the story of Ruth are similar to that of Judah and Tamar. She's a foreign woman seeking protection and provision for the future. Naomi thinks that the only way for Ruth to secure this is through using her sexuality. In chapter 3 Naomi sends Ruth to visit Boaz at night. She puts on perfume and a slinky dress. Boaz is asleep, perhaps after too many beers. In verse 7 it says that Ruth uncovered his feet and laid down. But the Hebrew is ambiguous. It could read, "Ruth uncovered herself and laid down at his feet." Naomi's plan is to put Boaz in a compromising position so that he will have to marry her and so provide for her and Naomi. But at the crucial moment when Boaz wakes up, Ruth goes beyond Naomi's plans and appeals to Boaz to act in his capacity as a kinsman-redeemer. Boaz could have taken advantage of Ruth. Here she is a poor, foreign, widow, offering herself to him. He has all the power. It wouldn't surprise anyone. But throughout the book he acts consistently as a redeemer, with integrity and compassion, providing for this vulnerable woman and clothing her with dignity. His integrity is almost painful as he says to her, "there's a kinsman-redeemer closer than I". He will make sure that when he marries Ruth everything is done properly in the sight of the elders of the town.

Boaz shows how power can and should be used. He demonstrates how God's law written on the heart produces generous justice. He is a model for how men, you and me my brothers, are to treat women, unlike Judah and so many men in the Bible. We need to be the kind of people our sisters can trust.

Both these stories turn upon a particular social structure designed to provide for widows. We can and should work for structures that bring justice for women. The Laws of the Old Testament are an example of how to build a just society, and they offer paradigms to form our moral imaginations. But these stories also show that working on the structural level is not enough. The structures are only as good as the character of the people inhabiting them. Judah acts out of selfishness and gives reign to his sexual appetite. Boaz listens to Ruth. He notices her character, unlike Judah, who just wanted Tamar's body. Despite his obvious desire for Ruth, Boaz acts with integrity and self control, consistently seeking to generously provide for her and other women under his care. To bring about justice for women we have to cultivate men of moral character. That is what church is about. As we read the Bible, hear it taught, put it into practise, cultivate habits of prayer and repentance when we stuff up,

learning how to serve, all these things build character. And especially as we teach our children and invest in their spiritual growth. For older godly men, as you invest in mentoring younger men and boys, you can help cultivate men of character.

Second, yes there are structural injustices that need addressing. But we don't need the structures to change before we act. Unjust structures don't negate our personal agency. Boaz goes beyond what is required by the law and generously provides for Ruth and Naomi from his harvest and from his table. Tamar acts with creativity and boldness within the social structure to secure justice and even expose the wrong done against her. Despite being an outsider, Ruth acts with faithful love to Naomi and works to provide for her. She understands the law and how it's meant to work in her favour and acts within its parameters. Ruth and Tamar are just 2 of the many great women of faith we read of in the Bible whom God uses to accomplish his purposes. I would love to see how we as a church, and particularly those with wealth and power, could creatively care for and empower the vulnerable women around us. Like Boaz that requires generosity and sharing our homes and tables. But justice starts with those in front of us.

Jesus

Boaz says "there is a kinsman-redeemer closer than I." His words point us to Jesus, our brother. He did not belittle or demean women. He always treated women with dignity and respect. He listened to them and made space for them. He's gentle and humble. He offers rest for all who come to him. Jesus shows us how power is meant to be used. How did he use his power? To serve. Listen to what he says in Mark 10.

You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. **43** Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, **44** and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. **45** For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Jesus used his power in the weakness of the cross, dying to ransom men like Judah who misuse their power. That doesn't justify Judah's actions. Remember forgiveness names wrong as wrong. Jesus calls men like Judah to repent, with the promise change and forgiveness are possible. And Jesus dies to ransom the vulnerable and abused like Tamar. He is the man we can trust. He will never let you down. He'll never take advantage of you. He nails your shame and my shame to the cross and he clothes us in his righteousness so we are pure and blameless in the sight of God. And that is good news we all need, women and men.