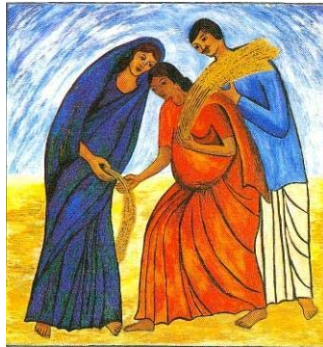


## Ruth – sermon on painting & text



Sisters & brothers,  
let me invite you today to look at the painting on the front page of your bulletin. Let us ponder over the picture for a few moments... let us discover more than one usually discovers when one only shortly looks at a graphic or a painting.  
...observe some moments of silence...

The painting which you can see on the front page of your bulletin today is part of an Indian artist's cycle of pictures of biblical women. Their stories inspired Lucy D'Souza almost 20 years ago to create a wall hanging of extraordinary beauty and power.

It has accompanied us at Peace Church for the last weeks and months. It has inspired Bible study and Sunday services; it has invited us to find out more about almost unknown biblical stories; and it has given us some insight on a few aspects of the Indian culture and the life of women in India.

From Lucy D'Souza comes a suggestion how to approach pictures and biblical texts.

First of all she invites us to look at the painting itself. Then she suggests reading the biblical texts and discovering what impact pictures and texts may have on our understanding of the story and its meaning for our personal life situation. She invites those who contemplate her paintings to spend sufficient time to take in her work as a whole and then discover details.

This is exactly what I would like to do with you today...

We can see three people standing on yellow ground. In this case it is not sand, as it is in Miriam's story, it is the colour of barley fields and wheat, of fertile ground in a country where there is enough food for all.

The three figures are very close to each other: 2 women, and 1 man.

The women wear saris: one in blue and one in red. According to Indian culture and tradition blue is the colour of the working class. Farmers, weavers and artisans wear it.

The other woman wears red, the colour of strong emotions, of sexuality and fertility, the colour of love and the fullness of life.

The woman wearing red is pregnant – expecting a baby sooner rather than later. Her skin is darker than the skin of the two others.

The woman with the red sari is Ruth, the Moabite, the immigrant in the new land. The daughter-in-law of the widow Naomi. Ruth had made the choice to

emigrate from her home and culture for the sake of an old lonely woman. Ruth loved this woman who had lost everything.

The old woman – Naomi – is wearing blue. Her head is bent over toward Ruth's. They touch each other gently & with something like devotional seriousness.

Naomi and Ruth seem to look in the same direction – onto the same thing: the ears of grain in their hands. Naomi holds them, and Ruth seems to take them into hers. An image of giving & taking, an image of sharing. Sharing what they need most essentially for every day life: wheat to bake their daily bread.

With her right hand Ruth is taking, and with her left hand she is giving out... reaching out to Boaz and sharing her daily bread with him.

Although in the biblical story it is in fact Boaz who initially shares what is his with Ruth, who invites her to stay and harvest with his people, the painter seems to express a later point in the story of Ruth meeting Boaz. A point at which Naomi, Ruth and Boaz already live together. A point at which their life together has already become a situation of mutual sharing, a flowing of resources from one hand into the other.

Just see where it begins: Naomi must have bent down to the fertile ground taking a hand full of ears of grain. She offers them to Ruth who gracefully accepts them. At the same time another bunch of ears of grain almost flow or grow out of her other hand, going over her shoulder and landing in Boaz's hand which is open in a gesture of welcome and shelter.

The figure of Boaz almost blends with the figure of Ruth. An image of great intimacy – leaving us without doubt where Ruth's pregnancy comes from.

Boaz stands behind Ruth like a guardian, leaning into the same direction in which Ruth's body bends. We can only see one of Boaz's feet. The other one is hidden behind Ruth, as if a part of Boaz has already become a part of Ruth. A touching image of closeness and togetherness...

Boaz wears blue and a creamy yellow: the colours of the sacred & the poor. (in Indian tradition yellow is the colour of religion, and blue is the colour of the working class).

In fact, in the biblical story Boaz is not poor at all – he is the one who possesses more than he alone needs, and generously shares what he has with the two female strangers.

Boaz has fallen in love with Ruth. Eventually he marries her, and by taking her into his household he takes in Naomi, too.

Ruth's feet point towards Naomi with whom she had come to Boaz's country.

Naomi will always remain an important part of Ruth's life – no matter how much she loves Boaz, and no matter how many children she is still to have.

With her left foot Naomi indicates a bond between herself & Ruth. And with her right foot she seems to be standing firmly on promising ground.

Naomi who had gone thru times of hardships and darkness finds new life within the small group in our painting. These three (plus the baby in Ruth's womb) are a symbol of touch and tenderness beyond all boundaries of race, sex, culture and origin.

Boaz's eyes are fixed on Ruth. Ruth and Naomi are looking at what can nurture them all. And all together they are fit for a future of happiness and new

beginnings. This is all the painting can tell us... at least if we have a little knowledge of the biblical background story...

The entire book of Ruth has 4 chapters.

Lucy D'Souza who is also a theologian, sends us four passages from the book of Ruth to explain her work of art.

The first passage is taken from chapter 1 v 22: **So Naomi returned together with Ruth, the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, who came back with her from the country of Moab. They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.**

Two women arriving in Bethlehem after a long journey through farewells, dangers and uncertainties. Behind them lies a life with ups and downs and hopes and losses.

In Bethlehem - which translated means 'in the house of bread' - there was no more bread: Elimelech and Naomi had left their home years earlier because of a threatening famine and moved to the country of Moab. Their two sons became married - in spite of the old Jewish laws - two daughters of Moab, to Orpa and Ruth. Soon after Elimelech and his two sons died.

This is the sad background of the life and journey of these two women.

Naomi, the old widow, decided to return back home to Israel, where obviously the famine had come to an end. For Naomi once more a long and risky journey - in order to survive.

The three women had already started heading for Israel, when Naomi asked her daughters-in-law to, please, return to the homes of their mothers.

Orpa, one daughter-in-law, leaves her in tears - and turns back home to her people. But Ruth does not want to be sent off. She is determined to choose the way into uncertainty... without any idea what to expect or what there might come... She stays with the old woman confirming her decision with these moving words:

**„Where you go, I will go; ...your people shall be my people... and your God my God.“**

That is now all part of the past. And before them lies a time of harvest in a land that is home to one of them, and a new land to the other.

Ruth, the stranger, young, beautiful and strong, decides to make the most of this time of harvesting. She makes use of the ancient right of the poor to glean wheat. After the field workers (male & female) of the landowners have done their part of harvesting the poor of the population are allowed to come after them and collect what is still left on the fields that had already been harvested. This was a rule in old Israel and else where to make sure that even the poorest of the poor had a chance to gather some food and were not condemned to die of hunger. Ruth and Naomi who had nothing but a roof over their heads were among those poorest of the poor, and so Ruth decided to try to harvest what was left from the harvest of the rich and coincidentally landed on Boaz's fields.

If farmers were generous in those days they would advise their field workers to leave behind a bit more of the wheat and harvest a bit less, to make sure that there was at least something left for the poor who still came and collected the leftovers. This is exactly what Boaz did after he had met and spoken to Ruth.

A second passage which inspired Lucy D'Souza to paint her picture the way she did, is taken from the book of Ruth chapter 2 v 8: **Then Boaz said to Ruth – now**

**listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field, or leave this one, but keep close to my young women.**

It is Ruth's faithfulness and love to the other woman who is Ruth's mother-in-law, that fascinates and impresses Boaz deeply. He shows unlimited generosity and care to Ruth. Even protection...

And when Ruth comes home with arms full of wheat, and tells Naomi where she'd got that all from, it is Naomi who is surprised, uplifted and suddenly full of dreams and visions again. Immediately she realises what great chance she and Ruth have by having found in Boaz someone who would support them.

She advises Ruth to put on her best dress and make herself as beautiful as can be, and meet Boaz in the night down at the barns where he had worked hard and was bound to have a rest.

Boaz falls in love with Ruth and makes all the necessary arrangements to be able to marry her. And here comes the painter's third piece of biblical text: **So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, God made her conceive, and she bore a son.**

The story comes to a happy ending by turning to the aspect of community: it is not the little two-parent-one-baby-family who rejoices over the birth of the baby boy, it is the whole community – especially the women of Bethlehem who welcome the new life and give the baby a name.

In chapter 4 of the book of Ruth we read: **...then the women said to Naomi: Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without support... He shall be the restorer of your life and the nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has born him. Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. The women of the neighbourhood gave him a name...** (v 14-17)

The women of Bethlehm rejoice with Naomi over the immense change in her situation! They paint a hopeful image of her future and make clear to her which value and position Ruth now has in Naomi's life. Ruth, the foreigner and the stranger, Ruth the woman with the dark skin, Ruth who used to worship a different God, Ruth is now bringing healing and rescue to Naomi's life.

No doubt, Naomi had lost husband and sons, more hardship than we think, a woman could bear..., but after times of darkness, uncertainty and pain, she's won a daughter who couldn't be more caring, and who is worth more than anyone would have ever imagined.

Naomi pays back such love and faithfulness shown to her, by sharing in caring for the baby...Again it is the community which cares... a powerful image of the kingdom of God in which no one is left alone and no one has to face the challenges of life on his or her own...

In Ruth's short story God is hardly ever literally mentioned.

But much more: God happens all the time.

In the relationships of the story's figures God happens all the time.

They themselves are "**goddling**" – if we try to form this verb – in whatever they do and however they cope.

Those who know me know that this is an aspect in the book of Ruth that has always fascinated me most. When you look at the story as a whole – which you may have to do today when you get back home from church - maybe you will read thru the 4 chapters of the book of Ruth, and you will discover amazing aspects of God working in this story and thru this story.

God appears in that brave young woman who lives and chooses without a support group – and who knows that the fruits of her decision may well be rejection, animosity and even death.

Later in the story God appears in the women of Bethlehem who welcome Naomi and Ruth...

**19 So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them; and the women said, «Is this Naomi?»**

...and offer the opportunity for Naomi to share her sad story.

God appears in Ruth who takes the initiative and starts harvesting what the poor are allowed to take from the landowners' fields...

**2 And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, «Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain, behind someone in whose sight I may find favor.» She said to her, «Go, my daughter.»**

**3 So she went.**

God appears in Boas who then lets Ruth glean wheat in the fields and gives her protection and support.

**14 At mealtime Boaz said to her, «Come here, and eat some of this bread, and dip your morsel in the sour wine.» So she sat beside the reapers, and he heaped up for her some parched grain. She ate until she was satisfied, and she had some left over.**

**15 When she got up to glean, Boaz instructed his young men, «Let her glean even among the standing sheaves, and do not reproach her.**

**16 You must also pull out some handfuls for her from the bundles, and leave them for her to glean, and do not rebuke her.»**

God appears in Boas' friendliness and generosity...

and in Naomi's refund ability to initiate and plan.

**1 Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, «My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you.**

**2 Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor.**

**3 Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking.**

**4 When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do.»**

God then appears in the love Boas and Ruth fall into and so on...

The happy ending in Ruth's & Naomi's story is that the two women succeed in finding home, land, bread and family... essentials we all need at all times to live our daily lives, bring up our children and make this world a place worth living. So let us be Ruths to each other, Naomis and Boazes, angels and friends... let us walk with each other, let us share our burdens and dream our dreams, let us feed each other and let us find a home among each other – in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

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## **Prayer**

God of love  
and God of the journey,  
we pray for all people  
who leave their lands  
and seek a home.  
We pray for men and women  
who turn their back to  
dreamless places  
but search for new visions.  
We pray for us all  
that we step boldly  
crossing lines  
breathing life  
sharing bread  
and creating home for one another.  
Amen.