

KINGTON BAPTIST CHURCH

ONLINE NOTICE BOARD – 15

A couple of days ago I happen to hear BBC Radio 4 *Thought for the Day*. The speaker was Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks. I was so impressed with what he said that I want to share it with you.

This is Mental Health Awareness Week, and its theme this year is kindness. Next week is the Jewish festival of Shavuot, Pentecost, when we read the biblical book of Ruth, whose theme is kindness. These two things coming together during this time of isolation made me see the book with new eyes and realise what a contemporary text it is though it tells of events more than 3000 years ago.

It begins with a couple and their two sons forced to leave home because of famine. They go to a foreign country where their two sons marry local women. Then tragedy strikes. All three men die. The woman, whose name is Naomi, is left a childless widow, the most vulnerable of all positions in the ancient world because there was no one to look after you. She goes back home but is so changed that her former neighbours hardly recognise her. Can this be Naomi? They ask. Don't call me Naomi, she replies – the word means pleasant. Call me Mara, bitter.

That is how the book begins: with bereavement, isolation and depression. Yet it ends in joy. Naomi now has a grandson. Her daughter-in-law Ruth and relative Boaz have married and had a child. This is no mere child. In the last line of the book, we discover that he is the grandfather of David, Israel's greatest king and author of much of the book of Psalms.

What transforms Naomi's life from bitterness to happiness is described by the Hebrew word *chesed*. When, in the early 1530s, William Tyndale was translating the Bible into English for the first time, he realised that there was no English equivalent for *chesed*, so he invented one, the word lovingkindness. Two people's lovingkindness, Ruth and Boaz, rescued Naomi from depression and gave her back her joy. That is the power of *chesed*, love as deed.

One of the enduring memories of the coronavirus period will be the extraordinary acts of kindness it evoked, from friends, neighbours, and strangers, those who helped us, kept in touch with us, or simply smiled at us. When fate was cruel to us, we were kind to one another. Human goodness emerged when we needed it most. Kindness redeems fate from tragedy and the wonderful thing is that it doesn't matter whether we are the giver or the recipient. Lifting others, we ourselves are lifted.

Of course the Christian can go further than the example of Boaz, Ruth and Naomi. And thank God we can look further than simply human kindness 'when we needed it most'. Paul points to a love that eclipses even the loving kindness of Boaz for Ruth: *'But God showed his great love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us!'*