

Did you notice the word gleaning? Gleaning is simply the gathering up of the harvest leftovers and this is what Ruth was doing. The practice goes right back to the law set out by Moses in our first reading where God had instructed the Israelites to deliberately leave some of their harvest for the poor and needy such as the orphans, the widows, and aliens. It is an example of a very early pastoral care programme to feed those who needed of help.

But gleaning is not just a biblical thing, it takes place in many parts of the world including this country. Let me tell you my experience of gleaning.

Have any of you lived or worked on a farm at harvest time? I have, it's hard work. For 3 months after finishing my A levels I worked on an arable farm – that's a farm where only crops are grown.

I caught the bus at 5.00am to get to the farm ready to start by 6.00 and for the next twelve hours, I would be a rogue. No, I don't mean that sort of rogue!

Preparing the fields for harvesting was called rogueing. 5 or 6 of us would walk in line up and down a field plucking out rogue plants which were growing. So, in a field of wheat, we would pluck up barley stalks and in a barley field, wheat stalks. At the edge of the field the older man in charge would tie them together and leave them there before we did the same in the next field.

Rogueing was the final task before harvesting. When the farmer decided to harvest the field, a small tractor would come along and cut down all the crop and we would then go back into the field collecting the cut stalks into sheafs. The fields were too small to have combined harvesters to do the work like you see on films and TV.

I asked why the crop around perimeter was always left around the field and the farmer said it was a centuries old tradition to always leave some of the crop for what he called 'the local poor' to come along and pick for their own use.

The locals could see which field had been harvested so would go along afterwards picking up the many crop stalks which had not been cut or left at the edge of the field. And I suspect that some of the very gritty home-made seeded bread we shared in our lunch break was made from gleaned wheat.

With hindsight, I realise that tradition goes right back to the law set out by Moses to provide for the destitute and Ruth was doubly qualified for the provision set out in God's law because she was both a widow and an alien. Her story illustrates perfectly how a vulnerable person can and should be helped, not only in the context of her own time but also in this country today.

But equally important, the story also shows a wonderful example to us of God's unseen hand at work in the life of ordinary people. Gleaning was probably the only way Ruth could legally obtain the raw produce to feed herself and her mother-in-law Naomi. Ruth comes to a field owned by Boaz.

Ruth came to Boaz's field, worked hard and caught his attention and the rest, as they say, is history. But just think, had she considered herself too proud or too embarrassed to glean Ruth would not have met Boaz.

That meeting not only changed her life but also ours too as her marriage to Boaz meant she became the great-grandmother of King David and one of only 4 women named in Jesus' ancestry. I don't think Ruth going to that particular field at that particular time was coincidence. No it was a God incidence.

And not let's forget about Boaz's part in the gleaning story. He goes above and beyond what was expected under the gleaning law when he told his workers to let some of the grain fall on purpose for Ruth to pick up. He was abundantly generous.

And we have seen extreme kindness and generosity in our community during the pandemic. Our collections this Harvest are being shared between the Bracknell Food Bank and our own foodbank which we created at the start of lockdown last year.

Nationally, the number of food parcels given out by Foodbanks to those struggling to feed their families increased by 73% during the five years preceding lockdown. That equates to 21% of adults in the UK experiencing some form of food insecurity.

In other words, they were worried about where their next meal would come from, or they were compromising on quality and nutrition, or in some cases going without food and experiencing genuine hunger.

Nationwide, during the first 3 months of lockdown 1, there was a staggering 84% increase in demand for assistance at Foodbanks. This meant that nearly 3 million children were at risk of going hungry either during school holidays or when they didn't have access to free school meals because the schools were closed down.

But thanks to a huge awareness campaign led by the Man U footballer, Marcus Rashford the government stepped in to beef up the school holiday provisions for children at risk of going hungry.

Sadly, the need of some families in our local community was part of the huge statistical increase.

Prior to lockdown we had occasionally responded to one off appeals for assistance. That changed almost overnight and between April 2020 and March 2021 we delivered just over 300 bags of groceries or supermarket vouchers worth between £20 and £35 to 18 families, plus 66 £25 supermarket vouchers to support other local church food poverty efforts.

But as in Ruth's story, God's unseen hand and grace was at the heart of what we were able to do. Firstly, a few days before lockdown we applied for a grant of £2,000 to help us support food deprived families. We were given £10,000.

And then six months into the lockdowns we were awarded £5,000 from the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead. We were also blessed with receiving other money from church family members who got to hear of what we were doing.

Secondly, we started to be given very generous gifts of dried and tinned foods to distribute enabling us to create our own foodbank. One day a van turned up at the vicarage with a huge amount – the family concerned couldn't go on holiday so spent what it would have cost them on food. I still do not know that family was, but like Boaz, they saw a need and provided in abundance.

By God's grace, in total we have been able to spend over £18,000 in helping these families, when we anticipated we would have just £2,000. That isn't coincidence; that's a God incidence.

And although the need has dropped significantly as restrictions have been lifted we are continuing to support 5 adults and 6 children on a long term basis.

Finally, I must mention the many people who volunteered to do the necessary shopping, sorting and packing up of the food parcels before delivering them. They freely gave their time and energy over many months.

Not only were we blessed through working with them, but also the families were equally blessed. Indeed, many have written effusively about how wonderfully kind and loving these people have been.

Like the hard working Ruth and the extremely generous Boaz these people have shown what love is all about..... the greatest blessing of all.

Rev. Terry Ward-Hall, 3 October 2021