

A Spirituality of Human Rights through Storytelling Listening, Welcoming and Sharing *Fr. Michael Lasky OFM Conv.*



It was a tense moment; what would he write? As Zechariah took up the tablet he wrote, "His name is John." (Luke 1:63) In this act the request of the angel was fulfilled. Elizabeth, the child's mother breathed a sigh of relief as she moved toward her husband and handed him their son, John. With his tongue loosened he gazed down upon the newborn in his arms, and filled with the Holy Spirit he then began to prophesy.

Elizabeth listened closely as he spoke of how their child would be the prophet who would prepare the way for the mighty saviour that God would bring forth from the house of David. This saviour would be the promise of mercy made to their ancestors! Her heart began to race as she comprehended how her son would announce the coming of the saviour who would ensure that Israel lived without fear, in holiness and righteousness. On hearing these words Elizabeth made a promise to herself, that her son would grow strong in justice. She would teach him through her special gift of storytelling.

Steeped in the stories of their ancestors, Elizabeth would bring to life the tales of long ago as she put her child, John, to sleep at night. Many of the stories



spoke of promises and mercy. Among his favourites was the story of Ruth and Boaz, which instilled within John the values of listening, welcoming and sharing. The allure of this story is its simplicity and justice, which concretely provides a framework for a spirituality of human rights, through the dynamic of mercy and respect of the human person.

The story always began sadly, as the husband of Ruth and others had died. Refusing to return to her homeland Ruth, the Moabite, made a promise to her mother-in-law, Naomi, that she would remain with her and that Naomi's God (the God of Israel) would be her God. Having travelled to Naomi's home of Bethlehem, Ruth sought honest labour in the field of Naomi's kinsman, Boaz. Having learned that she was a foreigner and seeing that she was a dedicated worker,

Boaz carefully assessed the situation and said to Ruth, "Listen my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women...I have ordered the young men not to bother you. If you get thirsty, go to the vessels and drink." (Ruth 2:8-9)

Boaz first asked her to listen, and then explained to her the reasonable and fair conditions to ensure her wellbeing. He offered Ruth the protection of his strong arm of mercy and justice. Having listened carefully and understood what was being extended, she agreed. Her free and willing cooperation was necessary for the mercy extended to be received. Mercy and justice cannot be forced. So, it was through a genuine offer, listening, and a decision made in freedom, that Boaz was able to secure the rights of safety, honest labour and a right to clean water.

The protection of her rights and honouring of her dignity was a new experience for Ruth, a foreigner from Moab. She had been welcomed by Boaz in a manner unfamiliar and unexpected. Surprised by such hospitality she asks him, "Why have I found favour in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?" (Ruth 2:10) Boaz answers that it is her deeds that have brought about this mercy.

Boaz's welcoming is a response to her decisions to be faithful to Naomi and embrace the God of Israel and thus find refuge under God's wing. Boaz is but the instrument of God's mercy and justice who also affirmed Ruth's dignity, as a child of God. So it is not only her deeds, but also her dignity as a godly person that has bearing on the situation. In this context we find that a common ground emerges along with the beginnings of a right to immigration through this just welcoming of Boaz. In time this attitude will grow in such a way as to recognize all people as part of a common human family.

Ruth then heard these words from Boaz, "Come here and eat some of this bread, and dip your morsel in the sour wine." (Ruth 2:14) And we are told that she ate until she was satisfied. Through this sharing of a meal Ruth found herself not only nourished in body, but also in spirit. The act of sharing a meal speaks of an intimacy that feeds both the body and soul. This everyday, yet profound, gesture of sharing a meal not only protects the fundamental right to food, but also speaks to the importance of shared conversation, through which such acts of mercy and justice can be more fully appreciated. This sharing eventually leads Boaz to enact the ancient custom through which he removes his sandal in the midst of the assembly and thereby takes Ruth as his wife. (Ruth 4:9-10)

Finishing the story, Elizabeth looked down at her child who would be the prophet of the mighty saviour, "Born of the house of his servant David." (Luke 1:69) With these thoughts on the edge of her mind she recited to her son how Ruth and Boaz were the parents of Obed, who was the father of Jesse, who was the father of King David from whom the promise of mercy would enter our world. As the boy closed his eyes, Elizabeth whispered a prayer for her son, who would prepare the way for the coming of this saviour.

John paused for a moment, many years later, when he was asked by the crowd what they should do. He allowed the tension in the air to build as he remembered his mother and her story of Ruth and Boaz. Through storytelling there had grown deep within him an abiding spirituality of human rights. Filled with the strength of mercy and justice he turned and replied to the crowd, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise...collect no more than is prescribed for you...be satisfied with your wages." (Luke 3:10-13) In the midst of the crowds John listened, welcomed and shared in such a way that when asked if he was the saviour who was promised of old, he sighed in relief and pointed to another. *f*

Fr. Michael is the director of Catholic Campus Ministry at Western Connecticut State University. In the past four years he has implemented the Step into the World in New York City & Geneva Program which partnered the university with Franciscans International at the United Nations.