

Sunday 13th February 2022 – Ruth chapter 2 ‘Kinship and kindness’

On Monday 2nd September 1996 I started work at National Opinion Polls, based at their head office in Covent Garden. Seven of us started on the graduate training scheme and we were told to report for our first day in the Boardroom at 9.30am. There we all were, a bit uncomfortable in our new suits, and to be honest, I can't remember much of what we covered that day. But I did happen to notice a pretty young woman with long brown hair who was sat on the opposite side of the table. The name of that young lady was Alise, and although it was some time before romance blossomed, we're now in our 23rd year of marriage.

For those of you who are, or have been, in a committed relationship I wonder if you can remember where you first encountered your loved one? Perhaps it was at a bar or restaurant, or through a friend – or as it was for us, in the romantic environment of an office boardroom. Many of the couples I conduct weddings for nowadays meet online. Not many of you, I imagine, met in a cornfield, your eyes locking on each other across a crowded harvest. But that is our venue for today, where Ruth and Boaz first encounter each other.

And what a lovely chapter this is, so full of uplifting elements. **Like a golden thread, grace is woven throughout.** Although Naomi knows about Boaz's family connection, it's clear from the narrative that Ruth doesn't – and yet she just 'happens' to find herself gathering grain in his field. You could call that a coincidence: though I think most of us would say that was a God-incidence.

And, as in chapter 1, **the chapter is bathed in God's provision.** When Boaz meets his workers he begins with a greeting we are very familiar with in church: 'The Lord be with you!' In fact for once I didn't start today's **online** service with that, which was very remiss of me: but this is where it comes from, the first and (would you believe) the *only* time this phrase appears in the Bible in this exact form. Who knew that it came from the Book of Ruth?

A little later, Boaz also utters a blessing over Ruth: even if Ruth did not know him, Boaz had heard of Ruth's kindness to Naomi and her courage and loyalty in leaving Moab to come to Bethlehem, and so he declares: 'May the Lord repay you for what you have done.'

Similarly, when Naomi finds out about Boaz's generous treatment of Ruth, she too utters a blessing: 'The Lord bless him'. She also declares: 'He has not stopped showing kindness to the living and the dead.' Whilst it is possible that this refers to Boaz, it is more likely that this is addressed to God: even bitter Naomi is starting to have hope again that a greater being is pulling the strings in their favour.

At the heart of this chapter, though, is kindness. Boaz increases his generosity as the story unfolds. All Israelite farmers were commanded not to harvest the edges of their fields, to allow the destitute to glean food, so this was normal practice – although often ignored. But Boaz goes further for Ruth: first he lets her drink his workers' water. Then he invites her to eat lunch with them, even giving her roasted grain. Next he instructs his workers to deliberately drop sheaves for Ruth to pick up, which would dramatically increase her gleanings. Finally he gives her and Naomi security by encouraging her to glean with him for the duration of the harvest (about 2 months).

And on that first day alone, Ruth goes home with a huge amount of grain: estimated at about half a month's worth of wages! No wonder Naomi's ears pricked up and her heart fluttered. This was no ordinary kindness, but something beyond.

Ultimately what we see in this chapter is **not just the enduring power of kindness, but also the fact that kindness is repaid**. Ruth's kindness to Naomi is repaid by Boaz – who becomes the answer to his own prayer. 'May the Lord repay you,' he says to Ruth, and then proceeds to do just that. Boaz is God's agent, showing God's kindness to Ruth through his own kindness and generosity.

It's easy to get compassion fatigue in this life. We can feel bombarded with needs and crises, and perhaps also cynical about efforts we've made in the past which haven't gone as expected. It's no surprise that, later in the bible, St Paul encourages his readers: 'Let us not grow weary of doing good.' **To keep showing kindness is not just an act of compassion but an act of faith**: faith to keep believing that our kindness does and will make a difference.

I'm sure Boaz had some freeloaders in his field that day. People who came back for free grain every year, and somehow never got their lives sorted out. We've all met them. So when a complete stranger – someone from a different culture altogether – started to glean in his field that harvest, he could easily have pointed her elsewhere.

But he didn't: he welcomed her, he took time to get to know her, and he met her needs. And ultimately, it was not just Ruth's kindness that was repaid: Boaz, too, through his kindness ultimately found a wonderful wife, and a family to treasure. Let's take heart that **kindness is never wasted**. Even when it appears that people are ungrateful or throw it back at us, kindness always contains a seed of blessing. And in showing kindness, God changes us, too – we become more like Jesus, the fruit of whose Spirit is kindness.

Today, let's be inspired by to keep being kind and generous. Ultimately we don't do it just for the people we serve: **we do it for God**: the Lord who is unfailingly and undeservingly kind to us. May God give us grace this week to receive his kindness, and then overflow in offering it to others. Amen.