

Sunday 20th February 2022 – Ruth chapter 3 ‘Law and love’

I wonder how many of you have become mildly addicted over the last few weeks to Wordle. For those of you not in the know, Wordle is a very simple mobile phone app giving you a five-letter word to guess each day: it's basically grown-up hangman. And in a matter of weeks, it's become so popular that it was bought for a 7-figure sum last week by the New York Times. It's a reminder not just of how much we love puzzles, but how much we rely on words.

Words are fundamental to who we are and how we live. The capacity to communicate at a deep level is part of what it means for us to bear the image of God, the God who speaks. And words shape us: they also change their meanings over time. Language doesn't stay still. Alise was excited yesterday because she used the word 'ghost' in its new meaning of 'ignore' for the first time when joking with our daughter.

Even very common words change significantly over the years: 'nice' used to mean simple or foolish, and 'silly' used to mean worthy or blessed. 'Awful' used to mean worthy of awe, but now has an entirely negative meaning and so we've switched to the word 'awesome' instead – though when you think about it, that only implies 'some' awe, not 'full' awe.

And in today's passage we have a very important word which has a huge significance in Scripture, but which has also become devalued in modern times – and that is **the word 'redeemer'**. Nowadays it's quite a trivial word: we redeem vouchers, or – if you're of a certain age – coupons. In other words, it's about cashing in something of relatively small economic value.

The other way we use the word redemption is in terms of someone coming good after a previous failure or moment of difficulty. So at the current Olympic Games we have stories of redemption, by which we mean an athlete who has lost out in the past now having their moment of glory. The biggest redemption story of these games has been Lindsey Jacobellis, who aged just 19 famously led the Olympic snowboard final 16 years ago, and decided to showboat over the last jump, crashing out. It took her four Olympic Games but finally, 16 years later, and the oldest female competitor in her event, she won the gold that had eluded her.

But let's notice that here, when we use the word redemption in this way it's basically someone saving *themselves*. Lindsey crashed out, then Lindsey recovered and won. No other agent redeemed her: she redeemed herself.

But this is not the true meaning of the word 'redeemer'. Originally, to redeem is to buy someone else their freedom. It is an act of self-sacrifice to benefit another – and as such is an incredibly powerful word. A redeemer is a rescuer or 'Saviour' in a true sense: and we see this word in action in today's story. To really understand what's going on you need to know two things about the culture which is being described: first, every Jewish family was given a plot of land when they settled it in the time of Joshua. This land was meant to stay with the family forever – but if hard times befell someone, the land could be bought – 'redeemed' – by a male relative, to keep it in the family. This relative took on the financial burden, so it was risky: if they bankrupted themselves in the process, they could of course make the problem twice as bad for their family.

Second, in the culture of the day, women were not allowed to propose marriage to men: but they could indicate their interest in other ways: one of these was, perhaps a bit bizarrely, to warm a prospective husband's feet. So that explains why Ruth puts on her best clothes and make-up in order to lie at Boaz's feet in the darkness of the threshing-floor at night – which would otherwise seem like a monumental waste of effort!

And Boaz understands exactly what Ruth is asking: she is both indicating her interest in him as a partner, *and also* pointing him towards his economic duty as a relative. But there's a snag: another relative is more closely related to Elimelek, and therefore has first dibs on buying his family's land. But Boaz promises Ruth he will sort this out as soon as possible, giving her a sign of his good faith by another generous gift of barley.

We'll have to wait till next week to find out if Boaz is successful: but let's make the simple but important observation today that in offering to undertake a costly duty which he was under no obligation to fulfil (since he was not the most closely related) **Boaz is living according to the pattern of his Lord**. Later in Scripture, in the book of Isaiah, God describes himself as Israel's Redeemer, the one who makes costly efforts to win their freedom.

By the time of Jesus 1,000 years later, the word 'redemption' had changed slightly again to mean the specific act of buying a slave their freedom. It was less the language of inheritance than of the marketplace. But the powerful idea remains the same: a costly act of generosity which obtains freedom for someone who does not have the power to obtain it for themselves.

And so we come to **the cross: to Jesus' own act of sacrifice to win freedom for those who cannot win it for themselves – us**. Redemption is an incredibly powerful and emotive word. We humans do a pretty good job of 'ghosting' God – ignoring him, letting other things get in the way, running things our way, and, like Elimelek's family in our main story, we now need a rescuer. Who will that rescuer be?

As in this story, it can only be one of the family: God's children need God himself, the original 'guardian-redeemer' to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. So God comes in the form of Jesus to buy our freedom: not with cash but his own blood. Jesus pays the ultimate price that we might be reconciled to him and find our true inheritance: to become part of his global family for eternity.

In a few moments time we'll share bread and wine in remembrance of Jesus, and as we do that let's remind ourselves what true redemption is: how powerful, how wonderful, how awesome that Jesus should do that for us. And let's respond in song now, by singing 'There is a Redeemer', and as we do that, let's hold in our hearts this incredible word: 'redeemer' – the rescuer, the Saviour, the one who gave himself to secure our future. And give thanks that you have a redeemer too.... Amen.