

Sunday 27th February 2022 – Ruth chapter 4 ‘Romance and Royalty’

It may surprise you to know this, but the Trendalls have a family crest. (SHOW) And what a lovely crest it is – just admire the fine red crosses and white stag, as well as the Fleur de Lys at the top, which is quite appropriate, given that I’m married to Alise (A-lys-e). And I’m sure the crest is totally legitimate, and not bought for a small fee from the internet!

A family crest is usually taken to be a sign of an august heritage – and in recent years, we’ve gone ancestry crazy as a society. Millions of us now spend hours researching our family lines, and the popularity of the programme ‘Who do you think you are’ (now in its 18th season) indicates that we’re even interested in other peoples’ family trees.

In fact, the importance of establishing our family lines is now so big that the government changed the law last year on how marriages are registered. After a wedding ceremony, the couple, witnesses and I now sign a printed document which has more detailed information about both parents, rather than the old handwritten registers of yore – and the reason for this is partly because vicars are terrible at writing registers without making mistakes, but mainly because we now want more information about our ancestors – in 100 years’ time, all this extra info about mums and dads will be on ancestry websites for your great-great-grandchildren to explore.

And at the heart of the wonderful conclusion to the story of Ruth is a family tree. A family tree that not only became incredibly famous, it also changes the course of first national and then global history.

But before we get there, let’s reprise the story: we finished last week with Boaz haring off to the town square (or gate, in ancient Israel) to settle the matter of who should buy Elimelek’s land and take responsibility for the wellbeing of Naomi and Ruth. It’s no surprise he’s in a rush, as his name actually means ‘swiftness’, and very quickly he finds the ‘guardian-redeemer’ – the relative most closely related to Naomi – and asks him to make a decision. And we soon discover that this chap would like the land, but no more family responsibilities. When it is made clear to him that he would have to look after Naomi and Ruth *as well as* get the farmstead, he backs out, shakes sandals with Boaz and lets him take responsibility for both the land and Ruth and Naomi.

...All of which means the perfect happy ending is in sight after all! **Boaz and Ruth are free to marry, and then they also have the great delight of a new-born son**, whom they call Obed – which has the rather lovely meaning of ‘worshipping’ in Hebrew. Our story has come full circle when Naomi cradles her new grandson in her arms: having lost everything, she has come home and everything has now been restored: she has a lovely new family. No wonder that her friends are moved to declare that Ruth is better than seven sons! It’s hard to disagree.

But there’s a post-script to this story, which in a way hints at **why Ruth is in the bible at all**. Granted, it is a beautiful and heart-warming story about faith, blessing, and a life lived in the light of God’s love – what the true observance of God’s law should look like. But actually, the context here is a time of anarchy and instability, of a nation ill-at-ease with itself and patchy in its relationship with God. How would this turn around?

The Book of Ruth seems to be God's way of saying: I've got this – I've got a faithful family who will point towards a better future, and a faithful rescuer who will restore the people. It's so often the way God does it, through one faithful family: think of Noah, or Abraham, or Joseph – one family who swim against the tide and see a nation transformed.

In fact, God has already been powerfully at work in this family. Boaz's father Salmon married Rahab, the ex-prostitute who had helped Israel to conquer Jericho and in turn had been welcomed into God's people. **Their son Boaz passed this blessing on**, by welcoming Naomi and her Moabite daughter-in-law Ruth. And Boaz gives birth to a son called Obed ('Worshipping'), whose son is called Jesse ('gift'), whose 8th and youngest son is a certain young man called David – which means 'beloved'.

And this David is *the* David, the future King David. **So Ruth, it turns out, is great-grandmother to the greatest King of Israel!** It gets better, of course, because 1,000 years later another king was born in Bethlehem, a descendant of Ruth and Boaz – who this time not only saved his people but the whole world.

And as we've enjoyed this wonderful story, all of this extraordinary history to come rests a whole millennium earlier on **two simple acts of faithfulness**: Ruth's in clinging to Naomi, and Boaz's in honouring his role as redeemer.

'We cannot do great things,' Mother Theresa once said, 'we can only do small things with great love.' That could be the sub-title for the book of Ruth, a book of small things done with great love – and which, in the economy of God, changed not just a family but a nation.

Fast-forward 3,000 years and all followers of Jesus are descendants of Ruth, in the sense that we have been adopted into Jesus' family, and now carry his family tree. Not a stag or a flower, but definitely a cross: the cross of our redeemer. And as we look in anxiety on all the acute troubles of the world at present, may we both celebrate and cling to God's faithfulness to us. The great message of Ruth is that even when things look dark, God is able to plot a way forward, even through the simple obedience of ordinary people.

May God grant us grace to trust in his faithfulness, and to recommit ourselves to a life of small things done with great love. Amen.