

Sunday 6th February 2022 – Ruth chapter 1 ‘Loss and loyalty’

Among all the many great stories of the Old Testament, the Book of Ruth is undoubtedly one of the most loved. It is a heart-warming, hidden gem which has given encouragement and nourishment to countless generations of readers. And for the next four weeks, I hope it will warm our hearts and lift our spirits, too.

What is the secret of its appeal? Well, first it is a story about individuals. Amidst all the epic biblical narratives of nations, here is a story centred on a few people. It is also a story about ordinary life: about real people with real challenges, but also real blessings. We get a glimpse into the authentic home- and working lives of a Jewish village roughly 3,000 years ago.

Of course, it is also a wonderful love story. The romance between Boaz and Ruth may be rooted in the legal landscape of its time: but all the talk of inheritance can't hide a classic 'will they, won't they' love story, with, of course, the ideal happy ending.

It is also a story of redemption. And this redemption works at many levels. The book begins, as we see today, with tragedy and loss. As the story unfolds, redemption comes not just to Naomi, or to Ruth, but also in the long run to the people of God, as this love story produces a very important heir.

Ultimately I would summarise Ruth as a story about faithfulness. Again, we can see this faithfulness on many levels: today we'll focus on Ruth's faithfulness to Naomi. In the weeks to come we'll also see Boaz's faithfulness to his family, the community's faithfulness to God's law, and most importantly, God's faithfulness to us. Although the human characters of the story make all their own decisions, throughout God's name is invoked. His is the hidden hand, and, as these events take place during the anarchy of the period of the Judges, ultimately what we see is the Lord providing a way out of this dark period: a family who serve God faithfully and, as a result, who will produce the heirs that will change the course of history.

In that sense, verse 8 of this opening chapter is as good a summary of the message of Ruth as any, when Naomi says to her: **'May the Lord show you kindness, as you have shown kindness.'** The word 'kindness' is a word often used about God in the Old Testament and can also be translated 'unfailing love'. It defines God's attitude to us: a permanent desire to bless, if only we will stay close to him. This committed loving-kindness is what Naomi sees in Ruth's devotion to her, but also what she therefore prays for Ruth. And the rest of the book shows how this prayer comes true.

But before we get to the happy ending, we have to start in a very different place. The book begins with disaster and disobedience. There is a famine in Israel, which the original readers of this story would have understood to be connected to the people's disobedience. According to the warnings of both Moses and Joshua, the response ought to have been to stay in the Promised Land, return to the Lord and trust in his provision. But instead, Elimelek chose the pragmatic option, and left with his family. It's probably what most of us would have done, but it's helpful to set the story in its original context: a loss of religious identity at both a national and now a personal level.

Moab was close by, but often hostile towards Israel: nevertheless the family settled down and blended in, intermarrying with the local tribe: another thing which had been forbidden. This explains why the author *describes* Naomi's situation, but doesn't *sympathise* with it.

The story begins in earnest when Naomi hears that her homeland is once again fertile – note the insistence that 'the Lord had come to the aid of his people' – and decides to return. The word 'return' is the same as 'repent' in Hebrew: so **this returning is more than just a physical journey, it is also a change of heart**. Naomi is re-taking her place among God's people, she is re-claiming her spiritual inheritance. She may be grieving, even bitter, but she is putting things right.

And what comes next is a life-defining choice. Both her daughters-in-law start out with her, but faced with the finality of the decision and the fragility of the future, Orpah eventually opts to stay home, and disappears from the narrative, and from history. Ruth, though, sticks with Naomi, offering one of the great quotes of the bible (v16): **'Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.'**

Ruth pledges not just her loyalty but her entire identity to Naomi. She is leaving behind not just her home and her family but also the pagan religion of her upbringing to embrace the Lord, the Almighty God of Israel, the one true God of the whole earth. It is this loyalty and devotion, not just to Naomi but to the Lord, which sets the scene for everything that follows, and is the inspiration for us today. If we substitute Naomi for Jesus, could these words be ours, too? REPEAT v16

Troubles in life challenge us to make a choice. They make us doubt our faith, perhaps even the goodness of God. Naomi certainly blames God for what has happened, and actually in a strange way that is important, because it shows that, despite everything, she fundamentally believes there is a good and powerful divine being who orders the universe. If it was just blind fate or chance, there is nothing and no-one to blame, and she has to accept her fate with passive resignation. But she believes in a real God, even if she is currently angry with him. And, however crossly, she commits her future once more into the hands of this real God, who does bless and restore her.

Sometimes life and faith is plain sailing; sometimes we cling on by our fingertips. But to be upset with God is not to lose him, or even to lose his blessing. One of the greatest things about God is that he is not an insecure tyrant, whose courtiers all have to be seen smiling in his presence all the time. He's big enough to cope with us shaking our fist at him, because he knows that his true children will always eventually turn that clenched fist into an open hand of prayer, and praise.

In the end it comes down to that old-fashioned but immensely important idea of covenant: an unconditional loyalty and commitment. It is what God always displays towards us. And Ruth likewise displayed that towards Naomi, and in fact by returning to her spiritual home Naomi, albeit grudgingly, displayed that towards God.

Today we celebrate 70 years since the Accession of our Queen, and a more modern-day example of this kind of unconditional love and loyalty could hardly be found. It is easy to miss the fact that Elizabeth's reign started with a 25 year-old losing her much-loved father, and we celebrate with her this year knowing she has just lost her irreplaceable Philip. But yet, her unswerving loyalty to us, and above all to her Lord, shines through. May her loyalty, like Ruth's inspire us to offer ourselves unconditionally to the Lord and his kingdom: 'Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.' Amen.