

People of faith: Ruth

The book of Ruth contains the story of an ordinary family: a husband, a wife and two sons. At the beginning of the story we meet them struggling to cope with a famine, and so they head off to Moab, where there is more to eat. They settle down in Moab, and in due course the two sons meet and marry Moabite women. Nothing too unusual there.

But at some time later the husband dies, and then both sons die too, leaving three struggling widows with no one to support them. Naomi, Elimelech's wife, decides to return to Judah (where the famine has now passed) but urges her daughters-in-law to go back to Moab and look for new husbands, which represent their best chances of survival. Orpah does the sensible thing and after hugging her mother-in-law heads back to find a new husband, and so to secure her future well-being. But Ruth refuses to go. She clings to Naomi –the same verb for clings to as in Genesis 2 where a man and woman shall cleave together, a commitment as strong as marriage - and refuses to return, making a remarkable speech about staying with Naomi regardless. She pledges to return to Judah with her, turning her back on the chance of marriage and embracing a different country and a different god, and staying there for the long haul, in fact until she dies.

If we read on, we find that Ruth is as good as her word. She returns with Naomi, and takes up a job collecting grain to provide food for herself and her mother-in-law. This turns out to be in the fields of a relative of Elimelech, who treats Ruth well. Eventually the relative (Boaz) marries Ruth, she conceives a son, and so both she and Naomi have their futures secured.

Much of the book of Ruth is alien to us from the perspective of understanding culture and context. And it takes a bit of thinking about to get our heads round.

Being 'owned' by a man, being left with nothing when he dies, being at another man's mercy, kinsman-redeemers and the like are all things that don't really make sense to us today.

We're more and more geared to nuclear family life, rather than the extended family. Our immediate unit is what concerns us. Family clans are not something that we experience in quite the same way. And likewise, the place of women in our society is very different. Women are no longer property. Becoming a widow no longer results in absolute destitution.

But for all the things we don't really understand, this is still a story that is compelling and touches us deeply, because we can see it's about pain and despair and need and loyalty and ultimately joy. All things that we can understand. Human need and human emotion cuts across the centuries and the cultural differences and form a

bridge between then and now, a glimpse into the writers world and then reflection back into ours in a flow of two way traffic.

And as is usually the case for good literature, the book of Ruth can be read on lots of different levels.

It can be appreciated for its structure and prose, (and if we had the ability to read and understand Hebrew we would recognise it as being carefully and beautifully written); valued for the position it holds in the Canon of scripture, enjoyed for the story it tells, plumbed for deeper meaning and truths about God.

The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole aged thirteen and three quarters was published in the early eighties. By Sue Townsend, it's a book about teenage angst that adults find funny and teenagers can't see what they're laughing at. In the book Adrian considers himself to be a bit of an intellectual and particularly with regard to literature. He reads books to impress people, not because he enjoys them or understands them. At school he studies George Orwell's Animal Farm for his O levels, as many of us probably did, and despite all the discussion that takes place around it being an allegory for soviet totalitarianism, this passes over Adrian's head and he concludes that 'it is simply, dear reader, a story about some farm animals'.

We could read this book of Ruth and conclude that it is a story about a family who have a tough time but demonstrate loyalty and commitment to each other, and we'd be right. But we can also seek to dig a bit deeper too and look at the underlying message we might find in the book.

For a start, all the names used have symbolic meaning. Elimelech means my God is King; Naomi means pleasantness, which she later changes to Mara meaning bitterness because of all that has happened to her. The two sons who die are called Mahlon (weakness, sickness) and Chilion (Annihilation, consumption). Ruth, we think, means friend or companion, and Orpah bizarrely means back of the neck! (because she turned around and went back to Moab, thus showing Naomi the back of her neck !!)

Ruth is someone who demonstrates unswerving loyalty. She could be described as 'dogged' –she sticks with Naomi, showing her commitment when there is no hope of things getting better. There is absolutely nothing in it for her, nothing to be gained, and probably plenty to be lost. Ruth reveals herself to be a person of great integrity and faith.

I don't know if you've ever watched one of those heart rending programmes where people are awarded for bravery and courage. They usually seem to fall into two

categories – those who have been involved in spectacular acts of heroism, rescuing someone from danger, diving into lakes, etc and those who have coped with a difficult situation over a long period of time, facing illness or caring for a relative. Ruth seems to me to fall into the second category of heroism. She would win the 'coping with a situation for a long period of time award'. It must have taken real courage and loyalty to decide to stay with Naomi, and to be prepared to stick with her for the long haul.

In this story part of the deeper meaning of the book is that Ruth's loyalty to Naomi mirrors that of God's loyalty to his people, Israel. Ruth's demonstration of love way beyond the call of duty mirrors that of God's love for His people even though there are many times when He would have been perfectly justified in walking away. And the timescale of Ruth's commitment to Naomi mirrors that of God's commitment to His people. He will not get fed up and leave, but stick with them for the long haul.

The irony of who Ruth is shouldn't be lost either. Ruth is from Moab, she is not an Israelite, not one of God's chosen people, and yet she is the character in the story used to represent God's loyalty and faithfulness. Ruth is a striking example of the truth that participation in the coming kingdom of God is decided not by blood and birth, but by the conformity of our lives to the will of God. Paul writes to the Roman church about the obedience that comes through faith, and Ruth demonstrates this obedience.

But it isn't just Ruth who mirrors God's love and loyalty in this story. Boaz, who she eventually marries plays an important part too. He is the kinsman-redeemer in the story – again not really a concept that we're familiar with in twenty-first century Britain.

In Israelite family law, each member of a family or clan had an obligation to defend and provide for any other member who was destitute or a victim of injustice. The redeemer of property was to buy back land a relative had sold in time of need (Lev 25:25) thus keeping it in the family. If someone sold himself into slavery, his nearest relative was to buy his freedom (Lev 25:47-55). If you want to know more about this look in Leviticus chapter 25.

In the book of Ruth there is an unnamed kinsman who is a closer relative to Naomi than Boaz, but he is not interested in taking Naomi and Ruth on. We learn that the near kinsman alone possessed the right to redeem, and yet was under no obligation to do so. And so Boaz agrees to the role. Something that would have been costly to him, both financially and organisationally within his family.

Redemption and the role of redeemer was clearly understood in Ruth's time. It was something that happened as part of the fabric of society. Nowadays redemption is a specifically religious word that many people would struggle to explain. I suppose the nearest equivalent we have is when parents bail their adult children out of debt, or help them onto the property ladder by providing a deposit to buy a house. But it's not really quite the same.

The Old testament speaks of Yahweh as Israel's redeemer. God is the divine kinsman if you like, who rescues the people out of their trouble, but it comes at a cost to him.

There is no coincidence here that Jesus is a descendant of Boaz. Boaz, who was the father of Obed, who was the father of Jesse, who was the father of David. And Jesus was a descendant of king David.

Jesus, descended from Boaz (the kinsman-redeemer) became THE ultimate redeemer in God's plan of salvation, both for the people of Israel and any others who found faith in him too.

Ruth was from Moab. She wasn't an Israelite and yet she was accepted into God's plan. King David and ultimately Jesus descended from her family.

Willingness to accept God in Christ is what makes us His people. Acceptance of Jesus as our redeemer, our rescuer is what secures us a place in his kingdom.

'Where you go, I will go. Where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God will be my God.'

The reality is that at times life is grim. Life lived as God's people does not exempt us from the difficult stuff. God requires people of faith to hang on in there.

As we seek to be people of faith, lets pray that we might demonstrate the kind of loyalty and commitment to God that Ruth showed, and that we might have the kind of compassion that Boaz exhibited as we go on being God's people where he has called us to be.

Sunday 7th October. House group notes.

People of faith: Ruth. (Ruth Chapter 1)

The book of Ruth can be read and appreciated on a number of levels: as a story of a family who experience hard times, but who demonstrate loyalty to each other; as a piece of beautifully crafted Hebrew literature; as a mirroring of God's love and loyalty to His people and his acting as their redeemer.

Although there is much in the story that we cannot connect with due to cultural differences (treatment of women, kinsman-redeemers, etc) the emotions that we experience as human beings allow us to bridge the gap to some extent. Feelings of grief, despair, hope and joy are as real to us as they were to Ruth and Naomi.

In this story part of the deeper meaning of the book is that Ruth's loyalty to Naomi mirrors that of God's loyalty to his people, Israel. Ruth's demonstration of love way beyond the call of duty mirrors that of God's love for His people even though there are many times when He would have been perfectly justified in walking away.

The irony of who Ruth is shouldn't be lost either. Ruth is from Moab, she is not an Israelite, not one of God's chosen people, and yet she is the character in the story used to represent God's loyalty and faithfulness.

Boaz plays an important part too. He is the kinsman-redeemer in the story; a role that would have been costly to him, both financially and organisationally within his family. This mirrors the idea of Yahweh as Israel's divine kinsman, and ultimately Jesus as redeemer of the world.

For Discussion.

1. Look through the book of Ruth. Are there any parts that you find hard to understand or connect with? Why?
2. How do you respond to the different choices made by Ruth and Orpah?
3. Can you think of any instances of love and loyalty beyond the expected in your life? When have you experienced God's faithfulness ?
4. Ruth was a 'foreigner'. What can people who are very different from ourselves (nationality, culture, class) teach us about faith ? How inclusive should we be?
5. How can we communicate the concept of redemption to people living in 21st Century Britain?