

Ruth

We have come to Ruth. As I promised.

Ruth is an old story. A story - perhaps - from one thousand five hundred years before Christ, although in the form we read it now it is later, maybe fifth century BC.

It has been preserved because it is a story of the ancestry of King David. Ruth is King David's great-grandmother. And of course, if Jesus, through his mother is of the line of David, Ruth is also the ancestor of Jesus. This is specifically acknowledged in the first chapter of S. Matthew's Gospel, where the apparent genealogy of Jesus is set out. (Matthew 1 v 5)

This story - Ruth - was preserved by the orders of the legitimate Kings in Jerusalem, the Kings of undivided Israel and then of Judah. And that's interesting because, the hero of the story, their ancestor, Ruth, was neither an Israelite nor a Judean - rather she was a stranger, a foreigner. Ruth came from Moab.

In fact, scholars say that perhaps the reason someone wrote this story down, maybe in the fifth century, was precisely to point that out. That she was not from Israel. Because that fifth century was the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, and the Jews of that time were talking and behaving increasingly *exclusively*, saying 'we are the chosen race, we are God's people, and the rest of you are all outside God's consideration'. Ruth throws a large spanner into that thinking. God is God, not just for Israel, says the story, he is God for everybody.

Now Moab was a nation, a group of people who lived to the east of the Dead Sea, in hilly and infertile country, well to the south. They never were part of the Chosen People and they didn't have any part in the Promised Land. Quite the reverse. The people of Moab are not buddies of the Israelites, they are seen by them as aliens at best and usually as enemies. Not therefore a people from whom we would expect descent to be claimed by kosher Kings in Jerusalem, the literal embodiment of the Covenanted people of God. It is as if a cat has got over the wall and has contaminated the pedigree blood line. And yet there she is, Ruth, the woman from Moab, the great-grandma of King David.

So - I think the point is made - Ruth is a stranger. An outsider. A foreigner. From an alien people.

The story in summary is this: an Israelite man marries an Israelite lady named Naomi. They have two sons together. The man takes his family out of the Promised Land. He does that because he has no other alternative. If he remains, he and his family will starve. So, he travels. He goes up into the hills of Moab, and amongst a strange and alien people. There he lives for years and there his two sons find wives from amongst the locals. But then, sadly all the blokes die. His sons die, and he too dies. His widow Naomi then

decides to go back to their original home. Back into the Promised Land. Back to her own people. The deaths of their men effectively dissolve all ties between the three widows. Naomi's two daughters-in-law – Moabite women, remember – react differently. One of them parts from Naomi, remaining in Moab. But the second, Ruth, journeys with the old lady, continuing as a daughter to her ageing mother-in-law. It ends happily, because the local squire falls in love with Ruth, and they marry and live happily ever after. They have a child – and he becomes the granddad of King David. The story ends with the old lady, Naomi, cuddling her little grandson in absolute joy. And of course, the place to which Naomi returns, to re-establish her roots, and where Ruth becomes the squire's lady, is Bethlehem.

Can we take from the story, first, the two women. Naomi is a widow. Ruth is a widow. Neither have a husband, neither have a living son. This was the greatest misfortune that a woman could experience. Neither had a protector or provider.

The two women respond differently. Take Naomi first. We know that Naomi is capable of generating a fierce loyalty in Ruth, born of Ruth's love for her, so see Naomi - I think - as a loving and much-loved woman. Capable of generating Ruth's love. She has given generously of this love to her husband and sons, and now she is bereft of both. They are dead. She's crushed by the tragedy she has experienced, "*Why call me Naomi,*" she says, "*when the Lord has afflicted me and the Almighty has bought calamity upon me?*" (1 v21)

Here's the point, I think. Naomi feels empty, abandoned, exhausted. Her best years were given to her husband and her children. Those people so dear to her are now dead. For her, life, she thinks, is over. She feels that she is finished.

How many of us, widows perhaps, can identify with that?

And what does God do?

God intervenes in the affair and provides the rescue. God looks after Naomi, makes her safe, gives her a new home, gives her a new family and a grandchild. The grandchild is the safeguard, the guarantee that she is safe for life. "*Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse.*" (Ruth 4 v 16)

The women of Bethlehem are clear from whence Naomi's turn of fortune has come : "*Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you without kin, and may his name be renowned in Israel. He shall be to you a restorer of life.*"

So we discover here yet another lesson to women. This time, perhaps, to those, like Naomi, who grieve lost partners, or children. Perhaps, in widowhood, lonely and lacking purpose. Here is our redemptive and transforming God saying yet again, '*I love you*'. We can read of Naomi and meditate upon the redemption. Because God has not abandoned us, we are

not alone, and His purposes for us go on. 'I have not finished with you', he says, 'seek me'.

Now Ruth.

When you get home, read Ruth chapter three verses 6 to 11 and see what you think. You can read the commentaries for yourself. Boaz has fallen for Ruth, he's going out of his way to show favour. But it is Ruth who then sets the pace. She goes for it! We have here another shaker and mover amongst the women of our Old Testament. This one is using her sex appeal, and you have to draw the conclusion that God approves. Now, is that interesting?

I'm leaving Ruth there – the women I want us to focus upon are the women of Bethlehem. What, in their part of the story, is God telling us about ourselves?

There they are getting in the harvest, and into their cosy little community comes a stranger, Ruth, the Moabite. She behaves differently, she looks different, she dresses differently – did she wear a veil, perhaps - she speaks with an odd accent, and they are pretty sure her religion isn't their own.

The first thing to notice is that the people in Bethlehem have found out all about her. "*All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told to me*", says Boaz. (2 v 11) And having found her story, they admire her.

In the reception of Ruth, there is no problem raised against the integration into that community of the stranger. We read that

1. First, Ruth is allowed to work amongst the community on the harvest. No one says anything that prevents her.
2. Then, Ruth is given access to their water. In Palestine, that is some gift. No one says go and draw it from our well, which in itself would have been a hospitable and friendly offer, an action of generosity. She is treated even better. She can drink the water they themselves have already drawn. And no one says, '*Ooh don't drink out of my cup, you will make it unclean. You are a foreigner.*' No, there is complete sharing.
3. Thirdly, Ruth is invited to eat with them. We know, don't we, that Israelites had views on eating with others, later on they were decidedly picky about who they shared meals with. But here is Ruth, sharing their food, sitting with them. Joining in the banter that is a part of people who work together eating together.
4. And the fact that Ruth is a foreigner is no impediment to Boaz, she can be his bride and his wife. Nor is that fact in any way a barrier there for the wider community. They rejoice, they praise God. They praise God for Ruth. For sending her to them.

Israelite custom – their law – gives entitlements depending upon parentage, upon your descent. You get things because you are the child of an Israelite. And you also get things, if you are married, from your spouse. No one says that Ruth cannot have these things. There is, for Ruth, complete delivery of

full human rights, and indeed not just human rights, but citizenship, membership of the community. The fact that she is a foreigner is no impediment : she is treated entirely as if she is of the community, an Israelite, a Judean from Bethlehem. Indeed, Boaz is told, “*May the Lord make the woman*” – that’s Ruth – “*the woman who is coming into your house, like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel*”. (4 v 11) Indeed, for all the twelve tribes claimed descent from those matriachs, Rachel and Leah, or their maids, the wives and household of Jacob. (Genesis 35 v 23) So, Ruth is totally accepted as one of them. How else can you explain linking her name with these honoured ancestral names? Ruth becomes one of the Chosen People of God, completely accepted as one of themselves by the people of Bethlehem.

So, let us get wise to the lesson God is teaching us. It is more than a lesson. God expects us to obey this **instruction**.

Under the New Covenant, we are now the chosen people of God, and into our community will come the strangers. What is our response? As a community, how do we respond? As individuals, how do we behave? Will our reception of the stranger who arrives here match that given to Ruth? Will it conform to God’s instruction?

Into our place of welcome, God wants to come the unloved, the unwashed and smelly, the sexual other, the white, the black, the yellow and the brown, the frightened and the frightening, the stranger and the foreigner, the Muslim, the atheist and the Hindu, the person who is so ill they are strange, the angry and the confused, the gossip and the tongue-tied. Think of the person you have most difficulty with in all the world of people. We will bid him or her welcome! I am not saying please do this. It is God’s instruction to me and to you. God instructs you and I to do this. God wants them welcomed. In His name.

There’s more. Just a little bit more.

You may find that you can say to me, ‘Oliver, I can say “Hello” - but I can’t love him or her’. My mother said once to me : ‘you may not like them, but you are commanded to love them’. I read somewhere of a way to deal with this, which I give you to think on - see everyone as a small baby. See everyone as a baby. It is dead easy to love small babies. Interestingly enough, every person in the world was once a small baby. Perhaps with parents who loved them. Perhaps with parents who wanted only the best for them. Perhaps with parents who prayed and prayed for their happiness. And the Heavenly Father loves them still. He wants the best for all his children.

And who has He in this world to give out His love to them but you and I?

So, don’t hold back. Don’t let some English reserve, or some middle-class distaste for the unwashed hold us back. Don’t let us deny Christ. We are the Easter people, transformed by the resurrection of our Jesus. It has to make a difference. Say that it does. Let us live it.

What will stop us? What will stop us obeying this command?

Well, its prejudice, isn't it. Prejudice. A preconceived opinion, a stereotyping, which produces hostile thoughts. We fall as humans into tribes, into clubs. Another human being is either in our club or not. If not, we are not naturally loving towards them. That's prejudice.

Our Gospel has no room for exclusive tribes or clubs, does it? Nor for nations. We are all the children of God.

Prejudice is not our fault. It comes into us with our mother's milk, our parents, our schooling and our friends. We all have prejudices. All of us, without exception. Since we all have them, we don't need to be ashamed of them. God knows all our prejudices. God understands how and why they come. And God has forgiven us.

But He does require us, I think, as we develop as God's people, really honestly to look at the prejudice in our hearts and minds. Understand it. Get to know it. Getting to know our own prejudice is God's requirement of us. Because if we know it we can work to redress it.

One fruit of the Spirit is kindness, and I know you are all kind. Kind people. After last week's Sermon, did you look for a way to become even kinder, a way to conform more closely to Christ's example? We could get to know and redress our prejudice.

Just take one. You think we are not racially prejudiced in Lichfield? Ask a person of a different ethnicity to your own. Some face prejudice here daily, in school, in shops, in our District Council offices. From the police. And I have seen it here. Don't say racial prejudice isn't here. Recognise it. Work to remove its impact. We must do the same with all those other prejudices in our hearts: prejudice - against single mothers, against Moslem people, against the different. I must do it too.

So, there it is. Ruth, the stranger, the woman from Moab coming into the community of the people of God. And the people of God say – come in, my sister. Be one of us. And they do that to conform to God's will for them. And I say, we are not different. For our God wants us to do the same.

In closing, let us remember the story Jesus told. He spoke of the bless-ed being in glory, and they were in glory because, amongst other things, they had received Jesus well. He says "*For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.*" And they say, "*Lord, when did we see you a stranger and welcome you?*" And Jesus replies, "*Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.*" (Matthew 25 v 34 ff). To me! To Jesus!

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