

Theme: Ruth and Naomi - facing loss

This week and for the next three weeks we are going to be talking about the book of Ruth, now the name Ruth is a Moabite name and is only found in the book of Ruth and in the genealogy of Jesus Christ found at the beginning of Matthew's gospel.

Now Esther and Ruth are the only two books in the Bible, not counting the Apocrypha, named after women, and Ruth is the only book named after a Gentile woman in all scripture. If nothing else that knowledge should increase the significance of the book of Ruth in the Bible for us, and make us ask ourselves why God wanted a non-Jew to be included so prominently in Holy Scripture. One possible answer to that question is that God promised Abraham that all the families of the earth will be blessed through him, Genesis chapter 12 verse 3, and Ruth is possibly the first recording of that promise.

Ruth's father in law was Elimelech and her mother in law Naomi both from the tribe of Judah. They lived in Bethlehem until a famine in the area caused them to move into Moab a country situated opposite Jerusalem, the other side of the Dead Sea. The fact that they moved to Moab on their own with their two sons was strange and may have been more to do with divine intervention for a future yet unknown to Elimelech and his family. And since no one else seems to have left with them and bearing in mind the poor relations Israel had with Moab, which I will talk about in a moment, it was also a risk that they would not be welcomed, but for God all things are possible.

But sadly, while in Moab, Elimelech died, and shortly after his death his two sons married Moabite women, one of whom was Ruth, and when they had lived there for about ten years both the sons died leaving Naomi and her two daughters in law without male family support, a dire situation for women 1000 years BC. It was a dire situation because property was passed down from father to son so women had no property rights, nor was work normally accessible for women, so there would be no money coming into the family. It was then that Naomi decided to return to Bethlehem where she was confident that her family, that she had left behind when they moved to Moab, would take care of her.

Now while Naomi was a Jew her two daughters in law were not, they were Moabites and Moabites were Gentiles who worshipped the pagan god Chemosh. So, while Naomi would be welcomed back in the Jewish community in Bethlehem that couldn't necessarily be said of her two daughters in law, so she told them to go back to their Moabite families and remarry Moabite men and leave her to go back to Bethlehem on her own, but Ruth refused.

Now before we go on let us look at Deuteronomy 23 verse 3 where we get some flavour of the Jewish animosity towards Moab, verse 3 reads, "No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Even to the seventh generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord". That means that while some

Jews may well live next door to a Moabite family they were to have nothing to do with them; they certainly weren't to enter into any form of relationship with them, let alone marriage; but why was there such a prohibition?

When the Israelites were fleeing from Egypt the Israelites met resistance from various countries who didn't want them to pass through their land or to stay in their land. The Moabites were one such nation who not only didn't want them but in addition wanted God to curse them for being there; you can read about it in Numbers chapter 22 to 25. But there were also more recent hostilities between Israel and Moab, and in all probability the memories of the ancient and more recent hostilities against Israel by the Moabites had not been fully forgotten, which is why two Moabite women may not have been welcomed in Israel.

So, it is not possible to over emphasise the courage and faith Ruth had in God when insisting that she would accompany Naomi back to Bethlehem; so how did Ruth come to be accepted in Israel and why did her story come to be included in scripture? Another clue to that is in verse 16 and 17, where we heard, 'But Ruth said'. "Do not press me to leave you or turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, there will I be buried. May the Lord's worst punishment come upon me if I let anything, but death separate me from you!"

In the New Testament, St Paul said that it was only through the Holy Spirit that anyone could say that Jesus is Lord; in the same way it was only through God's grace that Ruth was able make such a declaration of faith and Loyalty to God and also loyalty to Naomi.

Ruth had pledged herself to Naomi until death, but more importantly through God's grace had pledged herself to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Ruth had totally turned away from her pagan god, which had been her tradition since childhood and became a believer in the Lord God of Israel, and through God's grace had become a member of the covenant people, so much so that Naomi's family in Bethlehem could see the reflection of God in her which is why they accepted her.

This of course was no small thing that she did, not only was she turning away from her childhood religion, but she was also turning away from the Moabite family she knew and loved and was prepared to embark on a journey that held no guarantees for her future, such was her devotion to the God of Israel and her love for Naomi. She also knew that two women journeying on their own all the way to Bethlehem was a perilous thing to do, and held unknown hazards, but her faith that God would be with them and look after them was so strong that she insisted on accompanying her mother in law on the journey.

In verse 19 we are told that when they arrived in Bethlehem the whole town was surprised to see them, and asked, 'Is that really you Naomi'? Naomi must have said yes it is, but don't call me Naomi any longer, call me Mara. Now Mara in Hebrew means 'bitter', and Naomi goes on to say, "For the almighty has dealt bitterly with me". It is clear from that

that Naomi blamed God for the death of her husband and children, a common enough reaction even today when we hear people say, ‘Why did God let that happen to me’; a subject we touched on when we talked about why bad things happen to good people.

Although Naomi had been brought safely back to her family in Bethlehem, nevertheless her overriding emotion was the loss of her husband and two sons, which isn’t surprising, losing one’s children is very hard indeed. But she was so depressed that she couldn’t see any of the signs of hope around her, one of which was the loyalty and love of Ruth who she didn’t praise for her courage or loyalty rather she spoke only of her problems.

Turning now to Ruth, Ruth had made a very bold decision when she decided to go with her mother in law to Bethlehem. Had she stayed and returned to her family in Moab she would have been looked after, and still being a young woman would probably have remarried again, had children, and a settled life in her own country; much better than risking her life travelling to a country she didn’t know. But God had other plans for her, and through the influence of Elimelech and his family had seen and known the love of God in her life, and it was clearly God and God’s people she didn’t want to lose touch with, which is why she said, “Your people shall be my people and your God my God”. Ruth loved God, so much that she was prepared to sacrifice her life in Moab and to travel back to Bethlehem with Naomi to an unknown future.

Finally, chapter 1 ends on a high note, we are told that it is the start of the barley harvest indicating that the famine in Israel, mentioned at the beginning of Ruth, had ended, and also, in mentioning this as a conclusion to the chapter indicates that through God’s grace Ruth, and her faith in God, had been accepted by Naomi’s family, and the people of Bethlehem. Indeed, as we study the book of Ruth in the coming weeks we shall see the extent of God’s grace in her life, we shall also hear that Ruth’s son Obed was the father of Jesse the father of King David. Ruth’s great courage and care for Naomi shows through out her biography as does her faith in God; and through his grace God rewarded her beyond her wildest dreams.

In the next three weeks we shall be dealing with the other three chapters of Ruth so may I suggest you read Ruth, in preparation, it’s only three pages in the Bible and it’s a lovely story.

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