

Ruth and Naomi: The kindness of Boaz by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 24th October 2021 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Ruth 2; Luke 6:32-36

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All Bible quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

Introduction

Last week we heard the first part of the 4-part story of Ruth and Naomi from the Book of Ruth. To recap, the story is set in Bethlehem, more than a thousand years before Jesus. Elimelech and Naomi leave Bethlehem with their two sons to escape the famine, and settle in the land of Moab, where Elimelech dies. The two boys grow up, marry local girls and then both die, leaving Naomi without her husband and sons. Bereft and bitter, Naomi returns to Bethlehem, and one of her 2 daughters-in-law, Ruth, goes with her, in spite of Naomi urging her to stay behind, find a new husband and get on with life.

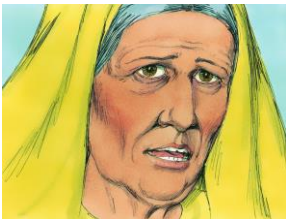
Last week John White helped us to understand what a brave step Ruth took in deciding to accompany Naomi back to Bethlehem. Because of the history of war between Moab and Israel, and because of religious and cultural differences, there was no guarantee that Ruth would be accepted by the people of Naomi's home village. Moreover, as widows they

were without the economic and practical support of a husband, and had no means of sustaining themselves.

The characters

So far in the story Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth have emerged as the two main characters. But in verse 1 of chapter 2 the narrator lets us know that another key person is about to make an appearance – Boaz, a wealthy farmer who is a relative of Naomi’s late husband Elimelech.

Last week John recommended that we take the time to read this short book for ourselves. It is a delightful and inspiring story. But we don’t read the Bible mainly for entertainment value, but to learn more about God, ourselves, the world and how God wishes us to live. Let’s see what we can learn from these three characters.



Naomi – bereaved of her husband and two sons.

“I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty.” (1:21)

Naomi is, understandably, overwhelmed by her loss, and blames God. The world looks bleak to her. But her life is not as empty as she thinks – she now has a devoted daughter-in-law, who is determined to provide for the two of them through her initiative and hard work.



Ruth sacrifices the security of her own country and family because of her fierce loyalty to Naomi.

“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. (1:16-17),

You could not ask for a greater commitment or show of love than that. And as John pointed out last week, Ruth has not only committed herself to Naomi, but also to Naomi’s God. Leaving behind Moab and making her home in Bethlehem is clear evidence that Ruth has put her faith in Naomi’s God, and is trusting him to provide for them.

The last verse of chapter 1 told us that Naomi and Ruth arrived in Bethlehem at the start of the barley harvest. The law in Israel says that the poor are allowed to follow behind the harvesters, picking up what they have missed or dropped.

When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the LORD your God. (Leviticus 19:9-10)

Economic interests must be tempered with compassion and care for the poor. We may order our society in a different way, but there should always be an emphasis on the responsibility of all of us to care for our neighbour, and not just leave it to the State.

Ruth takes the initiative, goes out into one of the fields around Bethlehem and works from early morning, taking only a short rest. The foreman in charge of the reapers lets her glean, and is clearly impressed by her hard work.

Boaz



Then the owner of the farm arrives from the village. It is Boaz, who happens to be a relative of Naomi's husband Elimelech. But he clearly hasn't met Ruth before, and asks who she is.

Some of you may have noticed how he asks the question: 'To whom does this young woman belong?' (2:5). From a feminist perspective, this may be an uncomfortable turn of phrase, as it highlights the patriarchal nature of the society of the time. Yes, every woman in ancient society was either the wife or the daughter of a man who was the head of the household. But the phrase also shows that in the Bible people are not just individuals, but belong to families and communities. Boaz has both men and women working for him in that field. Ruth is there as a poor person without her own means of sustenance. But she must belong to *some* family, Boaz assumes.

And then he learns that she is Naomi's daughter-in-law. In a village the size of Bethlehem the return of Naomi with a young Moabite woman must have been on everyone's lips. And in the few days since arriving in the village, Ruth's loyalty to Naomi has already become known.

We will learn in chapter 3 that Boaz is some years older than Ruth. He is not married, but in that society it is most likely that he has himself been married and then widowed. The fact that he employs a number of young men and women to harvest his crops, as well as a foreman, shows that he has considerable wealth and status in the community.

So Ruth is most surprised when Boaz speaks personally to her, invites her to take her lunch break with him and the workers, offers her food and instructs the workers to make sure she has plenty of grain to glean.

He also instructs his men not to bother her. He is well aware that a young single woman who is a foreigner is very likely to be the target of unwanted sexual attention from some of the young men. They might be wary of going too far with Rebecca, the daughter of Levi and Rachel, or that good-looking Leah, Jacob's daughter, who's just turned 17. (You wouldn't want to get on the wrong side of Jacob!) But it would be only too easy to get away with messing around with a Moabite girl who doesn't have a husband or a father to stand up for her.

It might be tempting for some to think that Boaz is beginning to show a romantic interest in Ruth. But when we read chapter 3 we shall see that this has been far from the case. No, here Boaz is showing concern for a vulnerable new member of the community. He goes beyond the requirement of the law which says he should not harvest to the edge of his field, and gives instructions to his men to pull out some barley from their sheaves for her, as well as showing her where to get water to drink and ensuring she

has more than enough food to eat and can take some home to her mother-in-law. In addition, he provides physical protection for her as a lone woman, and lets his workers know that she is under his protection.

Kindness and faithfulness

Both Ruth and Boaz are examples of two really important values in the Old Testament: kindness and faithfulness. In Hebrew the key words are חֶסֶד (pronounced *hesed*), which is translated as *kindness* or *steadfast love*, and אֱמֶת (pronounced *emeth*) which means faithfulness or loyalty.

We have just seen Boaz's kindness to Ruth. Boaz also recognises Ruth's loyalty and kindness to Naomi:

But Boaz answered her, 'All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. (2:11)

Kindness and faithfulness are two qualities of God, and even Naomi, when she learns how Ruth has been working in Boaz's field, and how kind Boaz has been to her, recognises God's hand behind it all:

Then Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, 'Blessed be he by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!' (2:20)

God's love and faithfulness are celebrated all over the Old Testament, and the two words often occur together. Here's one example:

But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in **steadfast love**
and **faithfulness**. (*Psalm 86:15*)

As Naomi sees how Ruth has fared on that first day of harvesting, she begins to trust God's good purposes again. I wonder if any of us have been in a period of doubt recently, and need to open our eyes again to see God's good purposes working out in the world through people who show kindness? After tragedy and loss, Naomi and Ruth's fortunes are turning a corner. Is it a time for you, or someone you know, to re-engage with life and trust God to provide in the future?

Could we learn from the example of Ruth, who has shown enormous courage in leaving behind the security of Moab for a new life with Naomi's people, and takes initiatives to help herself and her mother-in-law?

Or is the lesson for us today to be more like Boaz, noticing those around us who are struggling, who need a listening ear, or who are vulnerable and need us to go the second mile to show kindness and help them to find protection? As a country we are offering a home to refugees from Afghanistan at the moment. But there are many other vulnerable people in our society, both those who have been born here and those who have come here for safety from persecution or hunger, or those who have been trafficked and exploited. What are we doing to show them kindness in practical ways?

What God requires of us is clearly laid out in this well-known verse from the prophet Micah:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,

and to walk humbly with your God?

Micah 6:8 (NRSV)

Or as Jesus says in our passage from Luke:

If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? ...But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. (*Luke 6:33,35-36*)