

Ruth and Naomi: A Bold Step by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 31st October 2021 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Ruth 3; Luke 6:43-45

Introduction: the story so far

For the past 2 weeks we've been following the story of Ruth and Naomi from the book of Ruth in the Bible. Most if it is set in Bethlehem, more than a thousand years before Christ. Naomi and her husband Elimelech and two sons move to the neighbouring country of Moab to escape a famine, but, tragically, Elimelech and the two boys, now married to Moabite girls, die. Naomi returns to Bethlehem, accompanied by her loyal and devoted daughter-in-law, Ruth.

They arrive at the beginning of the harvest, and as they have no crops of their own to harvest, and no means of supporting themselves, Ruth takes advantage of an Israelite law that allows poor people to follow behind the reapers, gathering up what they miss.

The owner of the field where Ruth is working turns out to be Boaz, a relative of Naomi's deceased husband Elimelech, who shows particular kindness to her and makes sure she is kept safe from being molested by the workers, and that she has plenty of food to take home. Ruth continues working in the fields through the barley and wheat harvests, living with her mother-in-law Naomi.

But now that the harvest is finishing, how will Ruth and Naomi be provided for? Enter ...

The kinsman-redeemer

A law in the book of Deuteronomy made sure that a widow was provided for by requiring the dead man's brother to marry her and father a child so that the deceased man's line and property rights would be secured¹. If there was no brother, then the nearest male relative had this responsibility. The male relative was called the *Go'el* (גוֹאֵל), which is translated "kinsman-redeemer", or "next of kin" in the NRSV.

Now we've already heard in chapter 2 that Boaz is a close relative of Naomi's husband Elimelech², and Naomi even describes him as "one of our kinsman-redeemers".³ Boaz has gone out of his way to be kind to Ruth, even though she is a poor foreigner and he is a wealthy farmer. Naomi's excitement in chapter 2 at hearing that Ruth is being helped by a kinsman-redeemer of her husband's family now turns into a deliberate plan of action in chapter 3. If Boaz will play the part of kinsman-redeemer and marry Ruth, both women will have security for the future.

But so far Boaz has shown no sign that he's about to take up the role and propose to Ruth. What can the two women do to move things along?

¹ Deuteronomy 25:5-10

² Ruth 2:1

³ Ruth 2:20

The Marriage proposal

Let's take a moment to reflect on how things are in our own culture. It is now considered normal for people to have sex outside of marriage and to live together as a couple before marriage, or, indeed, *instead of* marriage. But there are a lot of women out there who would really like to be married, but are still waiting for the proposal from their man. One website I found has 10 tips for women who want to help him along⁴. Some of them seem like good ideas. I wonder what you think about 3 of the tips offered on the site:

The first assumes that the man and woman are already living together. It advises the woman:

1. *Do the "little things" that mean a lot – pack his lunch, do his laundry, even leave love notes around.* The aim of this is to show your man that he really means everything to you, and so, in theory, he should eventually "*get the message*". However, it seems to me that once you're living together and doing everything for him, he's got all the practical benefits of being married without having to make the commitment. What more does he think he's going to gain by being married? The girl clearly seems very happy with things as they are, so why make a change?
2. *Get "accidentally" pregnant.* The site admits "*This isn't the most honest way to start a marriage, but it may just get your guy to pop the question. Your baby may even bring you closer together.*" However, I'd have thought it

⁴ <https://www.thethings.com/how-to-get-your-boyfriend-to-propose/>

could seriously backfire. If the man is a commitment-phobe, then the prospect of being responsible for a baby as well as a wife might well prompt him to run away altogether. This probably indicates that he wasn't the right man for you, but you're then left holding the baby.

Not recommended.

Finally, this one seems to me a lot more likely to help the guy to make his mind up:

- 3. Don't move in without a ring... He will either decide to propose, or call the whole thing off. Either way, you'll know what the future holds. If he's the real deal, he'll pop the question.* Clearly, the stakes are high with this one. But it might prompt an honest conversation between the couple about how they see their future, whether they need more time to get to know each other, or other more practical considerations. If a marriage is going to be happy and lifelong, good communication is key. Best to start early on, in my opinion.

I really sympathise with women who think they've found the right man to spend the rest of their lives with, but "Mr Right" doesn't seem to be in any hurry to tie the knot. Like Ruth and Naomi in our story, they're looking for security, and they want to know that this man loves them enough to make a public commitment to them. And the guy just doesn't seem to understand this. And because the convention is that the man should propose to the woman, rather than the other way round, they really are stuck. Every leap year on 29th February I think of women who I'd really like to encourage to take advantage of another social

convention, which says that on this day a *woman* can propose. But you have to be careful advising other people on their love lives – especially if they haven't asked for advice!

Boaz's surprise

Back to our story. Naomi is now on a mission. In chapter 3 verse 1 she says to Ruth,

‘My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you. Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing-floor.’⁵

It seems that after threshing the barley, the men are going to have a meal with plenty of wine to celebrate the end of the harvest. Naomi tells Ruth to wash, dress in her best clothes and put on some perfume, sneak down to the barn without being noticed, and wait until everyone is asleep. Then she's to uncover Boaz's feet and lie down. “And he will tell you what to do”.

This is indeed a bold step. What on earth is Naomi expecting to happen? We already know that Boaz is considered to be a decent man, so Naomi trusts that he won't harm Ruth. Is her plan that Ruth seduces Boaz and so manipulates him into proposing to her? In Israelite society the expectation was that a couple's first sexual encounter would be the consummation of their marriage. Clearly Naomi's instructions to Ruth about dressing up and putting on perfume are intended to make her attractive to Boaz. She

⁵ Bible quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version

knows that Boaz will be in a good mood and will have been drinking plentifully, which might also have loosened his inhibitions. She doesn't define what she thinks Boaz will tell Ruth to do, once he finds her lying by his bed at night.

Both Jewish and Christian commentators are divided about the morality of what Naomi is proposing, although she clearly has the best of motives – to help Boaz to do his duty and provide for Ruth and her.

What about Ruth? “All that you tell me I will do”, she replies to Naomi. But we have already seen that Ruth is a woman who knows her own mind and takes initiatives, such as deciding to leave Moab, and going out to gather barley in the field of an unknown farmer in a village she has only just moved to. Ruth goes down to the barn, waits till everyone is asleep as Naomi has instructed, uncovers Boaz's feet and lies down. But she doesn't just wait for Boaz to take an initiative. When Boaz wakes up with cold feet in the middle of the night and is startled to find a woman lying there, Ruth says,

“I am Ruth, your servant; spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin.”⁶

Or, to put it in 21st century language, “Marry me”. “Spread your cloak over me” doesn't mean “I'm cold, please let me share your cloak”, but is a metaphor for “play your part as my kinsman-redeemer, my protector and provider, and marry me”.

⁶ Ruth 3:9

A bold step! Instead of trying to seduce Boaz, or waiting for him to take an initiative, Ruth makes a humble but very clear request – a proposal of marriage!

What about Boaz? We can only guess how much of a surprise this is to him. In the weeks that he has seen Ruth working in his fields he has gone out of his way to be kind to her, and, as we saw last week, he does so because he is a godly man who displays the qualities of kindness (Hebrew **חֶסֶד** pronounced *hesed*), and faithfulness (Hebrew **אֱמֶת** pronounced *emeth*).

What can we deduce from his reply to Ruth?

He said, ‘May you be blessed by the LORD, my daughter; you have made this last kindness (*hesed*) better than the first, in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. And now, my daughter, do not fear; I will do for you all that you ask, for all my fellow townsmen know that you are a worthy woman.’⁷

In calling Ruth “my daughter”, Boaz is reflecting both the difference in social status between them and the fact that she is younger than him. It seems he would have expected her to “go after young men” more her age. He sees her proposal to him as a great act of kindness on her part, and he clearly feels flattered! Boaz may well have thought of Ruth as an attractive woman during those weeks when he saw her working in the fields, and he clearly admires her character, which has been demonstrated in her loyalty to

⁷ Ruth 3:10-11, English Standard Version (NRSV strangely translates *hesed* here as “instance of your loyalty”)

Naomi. But he hadn't thought that she would want to marry him!

But not all the pieces are yet in place for Ruth and Boaz to marry. The kinsman-redeemer role has both responsibilities and rights. Boaz knows that there is property involved as well as a widow, and there is a nearer relative who might be interested in the property. The kinsman-redeemer's responsibility for the widow and his right to buy the property go together. Boaz will follow correct procedure and give the other man the first refusal, but promises Ruth that he is very willing to marry her. And from his opening statement "I will do all that you ask", it looks as if Boaz thinks the other man will decline the chance to fulfil the role. Don't miss next week's exciting instalment!

What can we learn from this week's episode?

The world is full of problems that need to be solved, and there are also plenty of people who have the expertise to solve them. But the problems and the people who can solve them often need to be brought together. Those who could fix a problem either aren't aware of it, or don't realise that they are the ones who need to get involved, just like Boaz. It needs another person to take the initiative to approach the person who could help fix the problem. Naomi is the one in our story who enables Ruth and Boaz to "get their act together".

Ruth, a foreigner, needs Naomi to help her negotiate the customs of the people of Israel. Naomi also knows all about Boaz, and Ruth is able to trust Naomi's assessment of him, as well as what she has experienced herself.

Are we open to God using us also to bring our knowledge and experience to guide people who are new to our church or community, or who are younger, or younger in faith, and could do with a mentor? One practical example is the youth mentoring scheme which Mike and Sandhurst Youth are running. But there may be lots of other informal opportunities where we could be used by God in this way.

We can also learn from Ruth. She's willing to take initiatives, and even to try an unconventional approach (such as sneaking into Boaz's barn at night) to achieve what she wants. She knows her own mind and is willing to be direct with Boaz. Are we willing to take a risk and speak directly to someone about something we need from them, or about something they ought to be doing?

We know from clues in chapter 2 that Boaz is the man who can make things right for Ruth and Naomi. But he doesn't realise that he is the one who needs to marry Ruth, and someone has to point it out to him. But once he recognises his responsibility, he responds with decisiveness and commitment.

I can think of several examples of people in this church who we needed to step up to an important role, but it needed someone to point it out to them. One important current example is our need for a churchwarden, but there are other roles that need filling. We suffer in this country from a culture of busyness in which people are always "too busy" to volunteer for something that requires commitment and personal involvement. There are also more people willing to "help" on a one-off basis than there are those who are

willing to take responsibility for something, even if they have the skills and experience necessary. Equally, there is a small number of willing, committed members of this church who step up to the plate, often quietly and in the background. We are very grateful to them, especially those who already have several roles. They would love to see some of those who are watching from the sidelines come forward to offer their time and services.

In the book of Ruth, the characters have autonomy and the ability to make a difference to their own lives and the lives of others. But behind it all we glimpse the hand of God, working through his people. And that is what is going on when we see a need in the community or in the church and take an initiative to get involved, when someone welcomes or gives guidance to another person, or offers their skills or expertise. As Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”⁸

⁸ Matthew 25:12