

The story of Ruth (Part 1)

A sermon given on Sunday 4th November 2018 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Reading: Ruth Chapter 1

Introduction:

If I asked you to sum up the story of Ruth chapter 1 in a word or phrase, I wonder what you would say? Tragedy is one word that comes to my mind. The chapter opens with a setting of hardship: Harvests have failed and there is little food in Bethlehem, whose name ironically means "house of bread". Naomi and Elimelech leave their home town in search of a more secure life in the land of Moab. Although things seem better for them initially, tragedy strikes when Elimelech dies, leaving Naomi to care for her sons on her own. The boy, Mahlon and Kilion, are presumably by this time old enough to earn a living, and in due course they marry Moabite wives. And then tragedy strikes again: both Mahlon and Kilion die.

Naomi's loss

Naomi has now lost her husband and 2 sons; Ruth and Orpah, her daughters-in-law, have lost their husbands. In a society where men were the breadwinners and women looked after the home and the children, widows had no economic means of supporting themselves. It should have been the responsibility of Naomi's sons to care for her, but they are now dead. Alone in a foreign land, Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem, hoping to find support from other relatives.

When tragedy strikes – bereavement, serious illness, unemployment or family breakup - and we feel pushed to the edge of survival, it is not unnatural to ask, Where is God in all this?

Naomi blames God – "The Lord's hand has gone out against me" she says in verse 13, and when she gets back to Bethlehem she tells the women, "Don't call me Naomi ('Pleasant') call me Mara ('Bitter') ...I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty" (1:20-21).

We cannot blame Naomi for feeling this way. Maybe you have been through times where everything seemed to be falling apart around you, and there seemed to be no hope for the future. Maybe you are in such a place now, or know someone who is. Nobody in the story blames Naomi, and nor does the narrator. After all, he knows something that the characters themselves do not know – that all will come right in the end. We, in our own difficult situations, are like the characters in the story – we have no guarantee that things will come right.

When I read Naomi's complaint against God, I was reminded of Job's reaction at the beginning of the Book of Job, when he hears that his property has been destroyed or looted by raiders, and then that all 10 of his children have died when the house they were in is destroyed by a tornado. In his enormous grief, Job accepts that the good things of life should not be taken for granted.

He said, 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.'

And in the next chapter, after Job is afflicted with a terrible skin disease, he faces his changed fortunes stoically:

Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?' In all this Job did not sin with his lips. (Job 2:10 NRSV)

Job, of course, is held up as an example of faithfulness under trial. Naomi is just an ordinary woman trying to cope with more than her fair share of suffering.

Is God to blame?

But all of this begs the question: is God really to blame when tragedy strikes? To understand what Naomi and Job say about God, we have to know a little about the philosophical context of the Old Testament. In the ancient world, belief in the divine was taken as read. The gods ruled the world, and everything that happened could be attributed in some degree to their influence, whether for good or evil. People prayed for rain, for fertility and for success in war. In Greek mythology, mortals often find themselves caught up in disputes between gods. But for the Hebrews, there was only one God, and so he must in some sense be responsible for everything that happens.

We find this way of viewing things rather out of date today, when we are trained to look at the world from a scientific point of view. There is a cause for every effect, and the job of science is to find out the connections and explain what happens. A disease like AIDS is not seen as a curse from God, a punishment for wrong behaviour, but the consequences of catching a virus, which can be avoided by adopting preventative behaviour.

The Bible does, in fact, allow for a number of causes for evil outcomes, including actions by human beings and the play of chance. Not everything that happens can be laid at the door of God. On one particular occasion Jesus is told about a massacre by Pilate's soldiers and asks

“Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you.”

Jesus then goes on to refer to an accident where a tower fell and killed 18 people, and again denies that their deaths were a punishment from God (Luke 13:1-5).

Ruth

But back to our story. Perhaps it is time to consider the situation from the point of view of Ruth. Bereaved of her husband, she clings to her mother-in-law with fierce loyalty and affection. Turning her back on the familiar, she follows Naomi to a foreign land with its unfamiliar customs and religion. After the historical hostility between Israel and the Moabites, there is no certainty about how Ruth will be received. She has been compared to Abraham, setting out from Ur of the Chaldees to find a promised land under God. Ruth has tied her future to Naomi and Naomi's God. And we shall see that her new faith will not disappoint her.

Ruth's response to her tragedy is different to Naomi's. Instead of turning inwards and bemoaning her misfortune, Ruth looks outward and is proactive. Naomi returns to Bethlehem because it is the familiar, and because her life in Moab is in ruins. She is mindful of all she has lost. Ruth boldly rejects the greater security of life in her home country and seizes the future with both hands, unsure of what it will bring, but with a deep-down conviction that love, loyalty and relationship are more important than anything else. Naomi looks back in grief; Ruth looks forward in hope. And as our chapter ends, it is Ruth's positive decision to pick up the pieces of her life and make something new out of them that will bring blessing not only to her, but to Naomi as well.

Lessons for us

What about ourselves? Are you feeling like Naomi, or do you know someone who is? Do you need a Ruth to come alongside you, or could you be a Ruth to someone else? Ruth does not try to explain what has happened. She simply offers her love and commitment and walks alongside Naomi, seeking a better future together. We do not hear her explicitly talk about her new-found faith in Israel's God. But we do see her living out the principles of that faith by practical loving action. Perhaps we too could be the people God uses to walk alongside those who are suffering, facing the uncertainty of the future with hope, until they come out the other side of their valley of darkness into the sunshine of a brighter day.