

The story of Ruth (Part 2)

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A sermon given on Sunday 18th November 2018 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Psalm 146, Luke 6:27-38, **Ruth chapter 2**

Introduction:

Think back to a difficult period in your life. How did you feel? Who helped you to get through your problems and face the future? Did things turn out right for you in the end? Even if they didn't, what good came out of your experience? – certain relationships strengthened, perhaps, important lessons learned, perhaps a greater strength within yourself?

In the first episode of the story of Ruth we heard the experience of Naomi, a woman from Bethlehem more than a thousand years before Jesus, who migrated to the country of Moab with her husband and two sons, all of whom tragically died. Naomi's crushing losses left her defeated and bitter, blaming God for her misfortune. As she was greeted by the women of Bethlehem, she complained that she had come home empty. But in fact, she had brought with her someone whose loyalty and love were to prove the key to her future happiness – her daughter-in-law Ruth.

Today we see how Naomi and Ruth's fortunes begin to turn around, and we will explore together what we learn about each of them in chapter 2, and what we learn from the new character in the story, Naomi's husband's relative Boaz.

Ruth

Let's start this time with Ruth. Vulnerable – without family except for Naomi who is also vulnerable and unable to provide for herself and Ruth (we don't know how much land she owns, but she hasn't grown any food this year and it's now harvest). Ruth is also a foreigner, and a woman.

Fortunately, the Law of Moses made provision for people who were unable to provide for themselves.

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the foreigner: I am the LORD your God. (Leviticus 19:9-10)

This same law is repeated twice, once in Leviticus and once in Deuteronomy. The three categories of people who were seen as the most vulnerable in society were the widow, the orphan and the foreigner, because none of them usually owned land, and so were dependent on others to provide food or paid work to enable them to survive. Being economically vulnerable, they were also vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

The experience of a great many foreigners who have come to live in our country over the past 60 years has not always been an easy one. They have often been discriminated against and treated as not really belonging, even after 2 or 3 generations. They have often had to take the menial jobs with the lowest pay, even if they were well qualified in their own country.

This was just as likely to be the case in ancient Israel, and so the Law is particularly clear about the way foreigners who live among the Israelites should be treated:

When a foreigner resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the foreigner. The foreigner who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the

foreigner as yourself, for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.
(Lev. 19:33-34)

[Note difference between Hebrew גֵּר *ger* (sometimes translated “resident alien”, i.e. someone who is settled and integrated into Israelite society) and נֹכְרִי *nokri* (a foreigner who may be newly arrived and is not yet integrated) – which is how Ruth describes herself:

‘Why have I found favour in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?’ (2:10)

This last category is more like today’s recent migrants into Europe who come from Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia etc.]

Ruth does not expect to have any rights, and is just looking for someone to take pity on her and give her the opportunity to pick up the left-over gleanings from the harvesters.

Yet Ruth does not sit at home feeling helpless. She takes the initiative and goes out into the field behind farm workers whom she does not know, gathering up the gleanings and working all day with hardly a rest. As a young woman with no family she is particularly at risk of being mistreated by the male farm workers – they know she has no father, husband or brother to come to her defence if she were to be abused or taken advantage of.

Boaz

Enter Boaz. We can see from his opening greeting to his workers that he is a man of faith. “The Lord be with you”, he says as he arrives from the village. He notices the young woman and asks who she is. He is told that she is the Moabite girl who came back with Naomi. From what he says to Ruth it is clear that he has already heard about her loyalty to her mother-in-law, and he praises her for her courage in leaving her own country and coming to take refuge under the protection of Israel’s God. Boaz takes no notice of social status, but recognises Ruth’s noble character and hopes that God will reward her for her good deeds.

But Boaz is not just full of kind words. He puts his faith into practice, giving instructions to his men not to molest her, encouraging her to help herself to the water provided for his workers, and inviting her to join him and his workers for their lunch break. He also tells his workers to make sure there is plenty of barley left behind for her to pick up.

Now I suspect that some of the more romantically minded among you may be thinking that Boaz has taken a shine to Ruth. All I can say is that this is mere speculation, as Boaz never, over the weeks that follow, takes any initiative to strike up a personal relationship with Ruth. When the proposal of marriage comes (don’t miss next week’s episode), it actually comes from Ruth, and Boaz is quite taken aback. We will learn that he is quite a bit older than Ruth, and has no expectations of marrying her. As far as I can see, Boaz is a man who, while clearly well-off and influential in the community, never takes advantage of his position but treats both his workers and vulnerable people like Ruth with consideration and genuine concern for their wellbeing.

Naomi

When Ruth gets home that evening to Naomi, who has no doubt been worrying over her all day, the story that Ruth tells is beyond her wildest expectations. She is impressed by all the barley that Ruth has collected, and wonders who it was that had helped her. When she hears that the farmer in whose field Ruth had worked is Boaz, a relative of her husband’s, she gives credit to God:

‘Blessed be he by the LORD, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!’ (2:20)

Do you remember the Naomi who had earlier accused God of treating her harshly and bringing her home empty? Now she sees God’s kindness at work, kindness to both the living (herself and Ruth) and the dead (Elimelech and their sons), in that God has provided for their dependents.

This word translated “kindness” is worth spending a moment on, as we shall see that it is a key theme of the book. The Hebrew word is **חֶסֶד** (*hesed*), which is often translated “steadfast love” (see, for example Exodus 34:6, 2 Sam 2:6, Psalm 103:4,8,11, Micah 6:8). Back in chapter 1, Naomi thanked her daughters-in-law for their kindness to her and her sons and husband, and prayed that the Lord would deal kindly with them in return. Ruth has displayed an abundance of kindness towards Naomi. Boaz treats Ruth with kindness in chapter 2. And in the next chapter, Boaz will comment on Ruth’s kindness to him, in asking him to marry him.

Application

As Christians, we have tasted of God’s love and kindness to us, in that God has not abandoned a sinful world but sent his only Son to be our Saviour. Each of us has experienced something of the love of God personally, and through the sacrifice of Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit we can come to know God’s love for ourselves in a personal and intimate way. In response, we are called to love God and our neighbour, and through our simple acts of kindness we can be agents of his love to those around us. And let us not forget that according to Jesus, our neighbour includes the foreigner, those who are not part of our group, our family or our nation. It includes the homeless, the migrant, the refugees and the victims of injustice and war, wherever they may be.

Through the kindness of Ruth and Boaz, Naomi comes to see that God is on her side. What simple acts of kindness could we do this week to help those who are vulnerable, whether emotionally, socially or financially? How can we express the love of God through our practical action, our giving, our praying and our advocating on behalf of those who do not have the confidence or the power to speak up for themselves?

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 for me” (Matt 25:40).

Questions for personal reflection and group discussion:

1. The Old Testament laws required the people of Israel to “love the foreigner as yourself” (Lev 19:34). How do attitudes and public policy in our country match up to this ideal? What about our own attitudes?
2. The Law required people who were harvesting to leave enough behind so that the poor and the foreigner could provide for themselves. How generous are we in the way we manage our resources?
3. What kinds of practical things could we do this week to show the loving kindness of God to others?
4. In what ways could our church better express God’s love to those who are vulnerable in our community?