

Ruth – who is my neighbour?

Readings: Deut. 6.4-9; Psalm 146; Ruth 1.1-18; Mark 12.28-34

There was a famine in the land. The land was bare – no crops, no harvest, no food. Elimelech, a man from Bethlehem in Judah left home with his wife, Naomi, and his two sons, Mahlon and Kilion, and travelled to Moab and settled there.

There was religious and ethnic persecution in Buddhist Burma. The Rohingya Muslim family decided to risk the perilous journey across the Indian Ocean to find a new life in Indonesia. Anything was better than being shut in a detention camp, denied all the rights of citizenship.

There was a war in Syria. The buildings lay in ruins, days and nights were filled with the sound of bombs and gunfire. The word had gone out that ISIS troops were just a few hours away. Her husband had been killed two months ago and she'd buried her older child the day before. The mother held her baby close and decided to risk the treacherous journey across Turkey and the Mediterranean. Surely she would find peace and quiet and safety and a new life in Europe.

There was no work in his country. He'd studied really hard at school and graduated from university with flying colours. But there were so many graduates all looking for the same few posts. He tried and tried but with no success and he felt increasingly desperate. Then a friend who'd found work in a country the other side of the world texted him to tell him about a new opportunity that had just opened up in the company he was working for. It would mean leaving his home and family and friends behind but it sounded ideal. At last, he would be able to put his knowledge and skills to good use.

The book of Ruth is only two or three pages long in our Bibles and at first sight, it's a simple straightforward story. It's set in the time when there judges in Israel, so fairly early days – maybe 1100-1200 BC – think early Iron Age tribal society. Life is tough. As one commentary puts it 'in a good year there can be harvest in Israel, but in a bad year there can be insufficient rain at the right time, or a locust epidemic. The country is always only one step from famine.' What is Elimelech to do? He can't feed his family and presumably the famine affects everyone else so the clan cannot offer help as they would usually do for their kinsfolk. Elimelech has to think the unthinkable and move his whole family from Bethlehem to the east across the Jordan to Moab. Why unthinkable? Because Israel and Moab have a long history of enmity. But not just that - at this time, people believed that your god was associated with your tribe or nation. Moabites and Israelites do not have the same beliefs – if you leave Israel, will your God go with you? But this is a crisis and there is no alternative so they migrate and settle in Moab.

Sadly Elimelech dies – we don't know when. And that could have been very difficult for Naomi with no husband or members of her tribe to protect her and support her. But her sons marry local Moabite women and they settle and become part of a new community

and live there for 10 years. But tragedy strikes again and the young men die. Once again the situation is perilous for Naomi – she may have settled in Moab but she isn't a Moabite. Who will protect her now? Once again, she makes the difficult decision to move, leave everything behind, return to her kinsfolk and hope that she might find some support there.

But – perhaps somewhat to her surprise – she finds that she is not so alone – her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, are ready to go with her. Not only does this story bear a woman's name – only one other such in the bible – it is very much a woman's story. These 3 women have formed such a strong bond that they have become a new family – no longer defined by their relationship to their husbands, they stick together and set off to go to Israel, even though it meant leaving behind the possibility of a future life with their own people, the Moabites, amongst whom they might find new husbands and have children. And Naomi recognises the cost of that choice and encourages them to think again, after all she knows from her own experience how hard it is to live in a new culture, learn a different language and feel like an outsider. Orpah heeds Naomi's advice and makes the difficult decision to lose Naomi and return to her own people. But Ruth clings on to Naomi – the Hebrew verb is one that is used to describe the commitment a woman makes to her husband to take his people and gods as her people and gods. The theme of commitment is one that runs through the whole of Ruth. In that beautiful and famous and quite extraordinary promise, Ruth makes a powerful commitment, not only to Naomi, but also to Naomi's God. Here is a Moabite woman – an ethnic group hated by those who thought of themselves as the 'people of God' – making a commitment to put aside her gods and worship only YHWH, the God of Israel. Ruth, the foreigner, turns out to be the one who keeps Torah, the Law. 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.' This simple story starts to become much more interesting and layered – it may be an ancient story from the time of the Judges, but it was possibly written down after the Exile. When the Jews returned to the land of Israel from exile after 538 BCE, they found that they were still a Persian colony in danger of being overwhelmed by others such as the Moabites. They returned to a land populated by a mixture of people – Jews who hadn't been taken into exile but also people from other parts of the former Assyrian and Babylonian empires who had been moved around by their conquerors - and there was a move by the Jews to exclude foreigners and people of mixed heritage to protect the community's commitment to God. As one commentator says, 'the book of Ruth was written in order to address an ancient xenophobia'. Ruth from Moab travels with Naomi to a new land, a new future, a new language and people, a new god.

As we return to the story we find that the focus shifts to Bethlehem and to Naomi's wider family, in particular, a good and honourable man called Boaz. Unfortunately we haven't time to read all the story but you probably know about it. You'll have heard how Ruth went into the fields to gather up the gleanings, how she was spotted by Boaz who found out who she was and made sure that she was able to gather the gleanings freely and safely in his fields. And you might be familiar with the story of how Naomi arranges for Ruth to meet Boaz – with marriage on her mind. Yes, there's a diversion and complication on the

way in the form of another relative who should really take legal precedence in the system of levirate marriage outlined in Deuteronomy 25, but Boaz finds a way to resolve that by negotiating with the kinsman for the honour of redeeming Ruth – and there is a happy ending. This is a story with a serious message for its audience but let's not forget that all good stories contain elements of tragedy, wit, sadness, laughter, passion and love. Read it through when you get home – but I want to make a number of points:

The theme of commitment continues to run through this story. When she gleanes the fields, Ruth is surprised that Boaz is treating her, a foreigner, so well. He replies that he has heard of Ruth's commitment to Naomi and that she has come to Israel and Israel's God for refuge and help. Boaz honours that commitment by becoming her protector, redeemer and restorer – why? Because this good man from Bethlehem follows Torah, the Law, which lays down expectations about how Israelites must treat foreigners in need who come to take refuge. Foreigners, along with widows and orphans, did not own land and had no livelihood so the law required that farmers left part of the crops in the field for those groups so that they had the means of survival. But Torah is more than a set of rules – this is God's way of living with generous loving-kindness – in Leviticus 19 we find the people of Israel were to love their neighbour as themselves – for they too had once known what it was like to live as foreigners in Egypt.

A scribe came to ask Jesus which commandment is the first of all. Jesus replied with the words of the Shema, words which lie at the heart of Judaism. 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might and from that commitment flows the love of neighbour as yourself.'

This is God's way of life. In Psalm 146 we read that God who made heaven and earth brings justice for the oppressed, gives food to the hungry, sets the prisoners free, opens the eyes of the blind, lifts up those bowed down, watches over strangers, upholds the orphan and the widow. God is our help and hope, our protector and redeemer.

Ruth, the foreigner, the stranger, the refugee, the migrant, the Moabite idolater, leaves her home behind to travel with Naomi, the sad widow, to a new land. There in Judah, in Bethlehem, the House of Bread, they find welcome and acceptance, protection and safety, a home and food, the love of family and the love of God. Boaz, the kind, honourable, generous man, lives God's law of loving-kindness. In his life and action, we see God our help and hope, our redeemer.

And Ruth the Moabite and Boaz the Israelite had a son called Obed and Obed had a son called Jesse and Jesse was the father of David – now there's a wake up call to the people who returned to Judah after the exile. Their most famous king had a foreign great-grandmother! And the story doesn't end there, of course – we know where that family tree is going..... from the shoot of Jesse...words we hear every Christmas from Isaiah 11.

Who could imagine that the life of a widowed Moabite woman, a foreign stranger, could be so significant? What does that say to us about what we think or say about outsiders,

migrants, refugees, foreigners today? God's story and purposes are much wider and longer and greater than ours – and they turn all our expectations on their heads.

And how do we live out God's law of loving-kindness today?

The short stories at the beginning of this sermon remind us that we cannot ignore or escape these questions. Our televisions remind us day after day of their urgency. And yes, there are all kinds of answers – political, social and economic – and as Christians we need to engage with that. But as Christians, surely there is a direction in which we must look, a way of life we must follow – even when sometimes that might not fit in with popular opinion or seem to be sensible – for who knows what purposes God might have in store?

A scribe came to Jesus to ask about the greatest commandment. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength – and love your neighbour as yourself. And who is our neighbour? If we could look from outer space, we would see that there are no borders on earth.

God's world has no borders and boundaries.

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