

## Reflection Ruth Chapter 1 Helen Hollands June 14<sup>th</sup> 2020

If you imagine the opening scenes of a disaster film you are close to understanding the beginning of the book of Ruth. The opening sentences would have disturbed the original hearers, because almost straight away they would have realised something catastrophic is happening. The signals are there even though we may not see them so easily all these centuries later.

Firstly, it is the time when the judges ruled, a time of some uncertainty, even chaos, where everyone simply looked after their own interests.

Secondly, during a time of famine, Elimelech, Naomi and their two sons have left Bethlehem and travelled to Moab, no doubt seeking food and a better life. There had been a great deal of conflict between the Moabites and Israelites in the past, even though Moab was a close neighbour and there was some shared culture and language. For example, in Deuteronomy (23: 3 – 6) the Moabites are excluded from the company of the faithful because it says they did not welcome the Israelites in the wilderness. The mention of Moabites would have made people wonder about these foreigners and whether they could be trusted at all. Then there is the famine, emptiness, hunger and a reminder of what it is we do to survive. The scene is set for a catastrophe to unfold – and it does.

Elimelech dies and the sons marry local girls, Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. Then the sons die and the women become widows with Naomi living in a foreign land. The women have to survive and Naomi decides it is time to go home because there she will have a better chance of protection. On the way she tries to send her daughters in law to their families in Moab. It is easy to contrast the response of Orpah and Ruth, thinking Orpah as somehow less faithful for returning to her own mother's house. But this is a good choice too, to go back to where she comes from, to choose her faith, her culture, her first family. Orpah kisses Naomi goodbye and they weep –there is much love here too.

Now we reach perhaps the most famous passage in Ruth, when she holds on to Naomi, when she will not leave her or desert her. This book is filled with mention of *hesed*, the word for loving kindness, which is so overwhelming just here. *'Where you go, I will go, where you lodge, I will lodge, your people shall be my people, your God my God.'* Ruth goes beyond what can be expected of her and Naomi realises she will not take no for an answer so allows her to journey with her, a foreign woman accompanying her home to Bethlehem. The women return in order to live, that's how bad it has become.

We might remember that Ruth is a foreign woman whose name ultimately appears in the genealogy of Jesus, part of his line, part of King David's line too – but this comes at the end of the book and at the beginning of Matthew's gospel if you would like to look it up.

This is a story of what it takes to survive when times are tough. It involves desperation, lengthy journeying, bereavement, environmental challenge and walking far from home to find a new life. Twice Naomi must go on this journey, it is no wonder she is so weary and sad. We might ask how this story speaks to us now, in all that has happened in recent months, all we too and others around us have done to survive. Many in our society today have lost those they love and wonder how they will cope, just like Ruth and Naomi.

At this beginning of Refugee Week, we remember those who travel to other countries, often because of war, or desperation because they have lost everything, livelihood, friendship, homes and family members.

For those of us who have had the security of a roof over our heads and a garden in which to continue to marvel at the astonishing beauty of creation, may need to take a step back and reflect on the extent of such loss. Have we turned away those who have been desperate, have we made those who seem different from us at home? Have we learnt something about survival in these past months? I read a commentary a few weeks ago which asked the question, will the world turn its back on Europe if we are so contaminated by this virus? Might we suddenly become the ones who are unwelcome? Who are we to judge others who flee because they are in desperate need?

Perhaps it is an irony of social distancing that we have come to realise how much we depend on one another. We long for human contact and we know how much it means when a neighbour picks up shopping, or we pick up medicine for someone who is shielding. We know how much we need one another in the global community, in the search for a vaccine, the carefulness around transmission, the need for medical supplies and PPE. We have been reminded of what is most important.

Suddenly the world is a smaller place and we cannot help but be in this crisis together.

For many families this has been a devastating time, there has been much loss, uncertainty and sadness. We in the church are challenged to think again about who we are. Do we demonstrate such loving kindness that it flows beyond our walls, our borders, our loved ones? How might we think again about who we in the church might be for this time? What have we learnt? Many of us realise the value of our communities and neighbours, some even for the first time.

The loving kindness of Ruth goes way beyond what could be expected of her. She makes herself vulnerable by travelling as a foreigner to an unknown place. When they arrive, Naomi tells the gathered crowd about how she finds herself alone – even though Ruth is standing beside her. In her actions Ruth, whose name means “friendship”, reminds us of God’s love and promises to each of us, I will not leave you or turn back from you, even when you do not acknowledge me. Where you go, I will go. I am with you always, to the end of time. This is God who holds us in sadness, carries us when we need to be lifted up, and will always inspires us to new things, whatever the journey brings.

Let us pray:

God of the journey

We pray for those who find themselves on a difficult path.

We pray for all far from home, whether walking a precarious road or sailing an unpredictable sea.

We pray for all those who flee in order to survive.

God be with them.

God of the journey

We pray for those who find themselves on a difficult path.

We pray for all in an unknown bed, a noisy ward, or consumed by sickness.

We pray for those who care for them.

We pray for those overwhelmed by sadness.

God be with them.

God of the journey

We pray for our loved ones, and give thanks for all that makes us smile,

the reminders of your glory, glimpsed throughout creation, in tiny and great things.

We offer you all that we are.

Remind us of your loving kindness.

God be with us, this day and every day. Amen.