

PODCAST – 28th June 2020

Based on Ruth 4:9-22 (NRSV)

In this month of June we are marking Bible Month. If we had been worshipping in our churches for these 4 weeks, preachers and worship leaders would have been encouraged to use the 4 chapters of the book of Ruth for their theme and reflection. Life has not quite worked out how we thought it would, has it?!?

But then life didn't work out how Ruth (and her Mother-in-Law Naomi) expected it to either.

Two weeks ago Helen set the scene for us, with an introduction into the book, the circumstances in which the characters found themselves and some of their troubles and travels.

I don't imagine that Naomi thought she'd ever have to leave her home town of Bethlehem or that her husband would die in a foreign land. She can't, initially at least, have thought that her sons would marry Moabite women and I don't expect that Ruth, or Orpah, expected to end up marrying Israelite men either, or that they would soon be widows themselves too.

Perhaps they thought that was it - that they'd had all the twists and turns that life could bring them, until Naomi decides to return to her home land. At first they go with her, then Naomi tries to persuade them to return to their own homes; Orpah eventually goes, Ruth stays – clinging to Naomi, to her path, her God and possibly the only bit of certainty that Ruth had.

The book then follows their return to Bethlehem – their reception by the people and their struggle to build a life once again. Ruth comes to meet Boaz, a relative of Naomi and the possibility opens up of a future of greater security and hope. This, however, is by no means certain and in the complex cultural setting – these two widows, one native, one a foreigner, still live a precarious life until things can become more certain. Their lives are very much in other people's hands – Boaz's, the male elders of the city and the rules that governed property rights and inheritance law.

Life is still uncertain for Naomi and Ruth right through into Chapter 4 – and the section we heard read for us today. Here Boaz has deftly negotiated his way through the 'next-of-kin' issues and is finally able to claim Ruth as his wife and provide greater certainty and security for her, and Naomi too. A son, Obed is born to them and we read that this son of Ruth and Boaz, will be the father of Jesse, who in turn will be the father of David....King David, himself an ancestor, many generations later, as the gospel of Matthew records it in Chapter 1, of another boy called Jesus, born in that same, small place – Bethlehem of the Ephrathites.

Now, one thing I think we can all be quite sure of – was that Ruth had NO IDEA that she would be in the family line of Jesus, the Messiah of the Jewish people, Son of Man, Son of God – Saviour of the World!

But back to Ruth for now.

A few things stand out for me as I ponder this last section of her story.

Firstly – it's a happy ending. I like happy endings but someone once told me that made me stupid because life just wasn't like that and I needed to stop being an 'idealist' and become a 'realist'

instead. They may have been right on some level but I still believe that happy endings, or perhaps 'happier' endings are still a good thing to strive for and seek out.

I don't know how you feel right now but I think many of us need 'happy endings' to lighten the harder times, and bring relief in the seemingly 'never-ending times' of social distancing, shielding, restrictions to our social and church activities and the ongoing statistics of infection rates, Covid-19 deaths and the smaller, but no less important, stories of people's personal suffering, bereavement and brave service to the community that roll on, day after day after day.

We may not know what lies ahead and may also feel, like Ruth and Naomi, that we've had more than we can take of unexpected problems but we are a people of hope, that hold out for 'happier endings'. We believe that in the midst of things, God is with us, with all God's loving-kindness - that the thread of that Hebrew word *Hesed* that runs all through Ruth's story, can run through our story too – right here, right now!

Secondly – Ruth's story speaks to me about 'invisible people' who do amazing things. Ruth and Naomi are to a certain extent 'invisible' in their community, as women, as widows – although Naomi's land-ownership and being in her homeland gives her an edge over Ruth with no land to her name and was living in a foreign land.

By the time we get to the end of Ruth's story, she almost becomes as invisible as she was when she and Naomi returned to Bethlehem. Back at their arrival, as Helen highlighted, Naomi says she comes back empty – even though Ruth is with her and has pledged her undying devotion and commitment to her. At the end, in Chapter 4, Ruth gives birth to her son and yet it's Naomi who is counted as blessed, it is she who takes the child and nurses him and presents him to the women of the community who name him. The book of Ruth ends up with a line of male ancestors, linking Perez, through to Obed and on to King David.

Ruth hardly features.

Ruth did amazing, brave, trusting things and yet she fades into the background of other, more prominent characters but she did good!

Right now, we are surrounded by many such 'invisible people' – doing good things, some great and others tiny, but all good. There are acts of loving-kindness, generosity, community support, selfless caring all around us, changes to policy and provision that make a huge difference to people's lives. Sometimes we hear all about these happenings and those that make them possible; other times we hear, see, know precious little.

In all these acts of love and service to others – I see the face of Jesus Christ. In those who are 'invisible' by virtue of their - gender, country of origin or ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation or expression, health condition, wealth or status – is a shared common humanity that we should value, notice more and give thanks to God for, every day!

I know some people like to stay in the background, I'm not saying we should force people to be up-front if that is not their way but we should have eyes to 'see' – those that are doing good things and helping so many, as well as those that need our help and find it hard to ask, or be seen, heard or properly valued.

Invisible people matter – Ruth shows us that.

Finally, I think that Ruth's story encourages me to see the line of inheritance that we stand within. We are a community of faith today, made up of all sorts of people and gifted the insights and heritage of all of those who have gone before us. Ruth lived a long time ago, in a world very different to our own but we are impacted today by her life, in the family line she enabled, through to King David and then another kind of king, in the child in the manger, born at Bethlehem – Jesus.

Ruth's story speaks to us of a God of loving-kindness – leading her to safety and security, not just for her but for her family. That same God is the one we come to understand as we read our bibles, trace the story of God's people over time, through to this day and our time.

In all the uncertainty of this moment, in our pandemic days, God's loving-kindness is still there – for us, for others; for the visible and the invisible alike; for those who have much and those who have little – in all the twist and turns of life, GOD IS HERE.

Let us pray:

*God of surprises,
when I think that you are not present in my life,
you reveal yourself in the love of friends and family
and nurture me with your never-ending affection.*

*God of surprises,
when we think you are not present in our community,
you labour to make us of one heart
and cause us to share gladly and generously.*

*God of surprises,
when people think you are not present in our world,
you bring hope out of despair
and create growth out of difficulty.*

*God of surprises,
you are ever with us.*

*When the days go by and our vision fades,
keep surprising us.
When our hope dims and our patience wears thin,
keep coming to us.
Teach us to keep our lamps lit
and to be prepared,
that we may see your loving presence among us. AMEN.*

(Prayer by Francis Brienen, taken from The SPCK Book of Christian Prayer, pg 5)