Sunday August 11th

Lord take my words and speak through them; take our thoughts and think through them; take our hearts and hold them in the palm of your hand.

As we all know, August is the Book of Ruth month here at Christ Church; one chapter a week makes for long readings but not necessarily long sermons... especially from me!

We have just heard all of chapter two where Ruth draws on all of her strength to work hard all day without stopping, gleaning in the fields to provide food for herself and her mother in law Naomi as they had arrived in Bethlehem with not a penny piece between them. All they had was each other and their belief in God’s providence. Having said that, I’m sure we all remember that Naomi did have a bit of a wobble in chapter one wondering why she had lost so much...her husband, her sons, everything she held dear? The two widows were exhausted, hungry, frightened and emotionally drained and they had no idea what the future might hold for them.

Mark Twain once wrote ‘When in doubt, do the right thing’ so Ruth, devoted daughter in law that she was, did the one thing that she knew she could do....she went to work. She knew that she had to earn enough money to feed herself and Naomi and put a roof over their heads. What a relationship there must have been between these two women...how much love? I am in awe of them. Some of us have had a mother in law of our own...mine scared the life out of me! But I am a mother in law myself now and I am sure my own daughter in law would have a few tales to tell you. Naomi was a very special mother in law who saw the gracious acts of God in the gracious acts of others and in Ruth she was very blessed.

They had arrived in Bethlehem in time for the Barley harvest so Ruth headed into the fields where the workers were harvesting the crop because everyone knew that according to the laws laid down in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, wealthy landowners ensured that their workers would leave a portion of their harvest at the edges of the fields to be collected or ‘gleaned’ by the poor. The Israelites believed that the love of God is expressed in the care of the poor. Gleaning was not a condescending act of charity; it enabled the poor to work with dignity for a financial reward. And it’s just the same for us today. How well do we support the migrants who come to our country seeking a better life for themselves and their families? The media is full of stories about migrants who only come to the UK to claim benefits, but how much help do we give them to find paid employment? I wonder how can we make a practical difference here on the Wirral? I’m not suggesting for a moment that we all have to live like Mother Theresa of Calcutta out on the streets of Birkenhead, but I am sure that we can all do as she suggested, and ‘do something beautiful for God’, we can do something to help those who may not have quite as much as we do.

 Don’t worry, I’m not going to do a Mike and ask everyone what they are going to do this week to make a difference, but I am asking each and every one of us to pause and think during the week ahead about what our ‘Something beautiful for God’ might be.

I am a great believer in Serendipity, happy accidents, or as Eunice calls them, God incidents. I think we have all had them...finding a parking space just when we need it, spotting a job advert when we weren’t even looking and then getting the job; meeting our best friends, even partners, just because we were in the same place at the same time. I met Terry waiting for ferry to Belfast 40 years ago when I almost didn’t go because I was supposed to be somewhere else. And despite an early false start, thanks to that happy accident called Friends Reunited we are now back together. (There’s not enough time to tell you the whole story here!)

So when Ruth went gleaning, it was more than a happy accident that the field she found to work in belonged to Boaz, who just happened to be related to Naomi’s dead husband. That is really important because family was the focal point of Israelite social and kinship structure. Family was the beneficiary of the land owned by God and basically, the wider family members had an obligation to God to care for each other. Boaz made sure that Ruth was looked after by the women workers and warned the young men to stay away from her. He prayed that the Lord would reward her for looking after Naomi in his lovely ‘Wings of refuge’ prayer...little did he know that it would be through himself that his prayers would be answered.

Spoiler alert...if Walt Disney had read his bible thoroughly, we would probably have had a romantic musical animation that we could have sung along with at this point, but this gentle story of love and family, grace and gratitude has not been enhanced by Disney magic. It’s just been touched by God...and as result of a happy accident, Ruth met the right man at the right time and ended up as the great granny of King David and took her part in the lineage of Christ. I think that if Jesus ever did ‘Who do you think you are?’ he would be very proud to find Ruth in his family tree because she was so full of love and hope that she gave up everything to look after Naomi and keep her safe, working her fingers to the bone to feed them both.

Within our own families and communities, we too look after and care for each other. For most of us, it’s within our birth family that we learn about life and love. Sadly, for some of us that isn’t always the case and so we create new networks of friends and communities; our friends are the family we choose for ourselves. It’s more than a happy accident that we all choose to be part of this parish community where we have so many opportunities to love and care for each other. Together, we are a covenant people, loving and worshipping our God. We belong to Christ. In him we have found our home and our name; we are Christian.