

Sunday August 4<sup>th</sup> Ruth 1: 1-22 Mark 3:31-35

Prayer: May the words I speak be those You want spoken, may the words we hear be those You want heard, may we live to Your glory. Amen

This morning we're starting a series on the book of Ruth which will run for the month of August. This book is a real jewel in the middle of the Old Testament! It is so refreshing and illustrates how God works intimately in ordinary lives even though they were probably unaware of it. There's a lot about relationships, inclusion and exclusion, living with tragedy, finding God in people and places where maybe we weren't looking and God exceeding our wildest dreams...

Its historical setting is the time of Judges – although it's likely to have been written much later. This was a time of turmoil for the Israelites. They had entered the Promised Land but were without strong leadership and so had lost their focus on God, their identity and most people just did their own thing.

Bethlehem, the city whose name meant the place of bread, was suffering from famine. We're not told why, it could have been weather induced or raids from neighbouring occupants. However one family decided that rather than wait until things improved they would do something about it – much like migrants today. Elimelek took his wife Naomi and their two sons to Moab – possibly only been 50 miles away but apparently free from famine. However the Moabites were antagonistic towards the Jews; they worshipped a different god and the Jews had been given advised not to mix with these people.

We could point the finger at Elimelek – whose name means God is King – and criticise him for not staying and trusting in God. After all it seems that those who remained in Bethlehem survived. But I'm sure, like him, we've all made decisions that in hindsight we wish we hadn't but what we will discover from the book of Ruth that no situation is irredeemable. You can never get totally away from God's love, care and presence.

Sadly, and not so unlike many migrants today, what had held such hope for Elimelek and his family turned out to be disaster and tragedy. First Elimelek dies. Imagine how hard it is for Naomi, she's in a strange place and now a widow. And if that's not enough to cope with before long her 2 sons who had married Moabite girls also died. Often it's hard to believe that some families have so much tragedy. To have lost a husband was difficult enough – but both sons? All that represented her livelihood and future and in a foreign land? It has been said that when a mother loses a child, no matter what age, her heart is broken in more places than she knew existed.

Naomi – whose name means pleasant was broken and distraught. Where could she find comfort?

On hearing that there was food in Bethlehem she decided to return to her homeland. It's never easy going back. Each step would remind her of the shattered dream and losses she was carrying. She must also have doubted if she would be accepted again and any land that they previously owned would no longer be hers without sons to inherit it. What a desperate situation.

However there was a little comfort in her pain through human relationships. Never underestimate the value of being alongside someone in their darkest moments. We joke about the mother-in-law but Naomi seems to have had a special relationship with Ruth and Orpah - to the extent that they were prepared to leave their homeland and go with Naomi to Bethlehem.

Maybe as they walked together Naomi recalled the struggles of settling down with a different people group. Moabite women were unlikely to be welcome in Bethlehem and she had nothing to offer them. No home, no potential of husbands - absolutely nothing! She couldn't expect anyone to sacrifice that much for her. And so she selflessly encourages them to stay in Moab – and amazingly she prays a prayer of blessing for them that the Lord would extend his kindness to them just as they had to her. Despite all she had been through, somehow she still held on to her God and kept praying and longing for his blessing!

Naomi kisses them farewell; they weep together and although the girls still want to accompany her Naomi is persuasive. Why should they sacrifice their hope for a family and their own inheritance by returning with her? And then we get a glimpse of her deep heart feeling – God was against her; life was bitter and she wasn't scared to admit her feelings to them or to God.

I've often debated with people. Can you rail against God? Shout at him? Blame him? After all he's God! But just take a look at the Psalms – they are full of people who do just this! And then there's a book entitled Lamentations! Have we too much British reserve – too much stiff upper lip to be real with God? Why cover up our feelings when God knows them already! He is more than able to deal with them and we can only start to find healing when we come to him in honesty with all our hurts and pains. Bottling them up, like I so often do, is like increasing the pressure on a dam which only needs a crack to result in utter devastation – and we've certainly been aware of such a danger this week from Whaley Bridge. We need to keep draining off and relasing the hurts.

Orpah listens to Naomi; what she said made sense and there is no criticism of Orpah – it was the sensible thing to do. She had been willing – but now she is released to live her own life.

However Ruth goes beyond the call of duty. She leaves her homeland, everything that was familiar to embark on a future that to all intents and purposes looked meaningless. She gave everything of herself to enjoy relationship with someone else. And that reminds me of Jesus – he gave everything – even dying such an appalling death so that we can enjoy relationship with God.

And what an all embracing commitment Ruth was willing to give! Her continual presence with Naomi, an acceptance of Naomi's people who may not accept her and a trust in a God who on the surface looked as though he had abandoned them. Would we, would I, be willing to make such a commitment? Can we trust God – when everything around us tells us not to?

Ruth and Naomi cause quite a stir when they arrive in to Bethlehem. Everyone notices them – but this isn't the Naomi they remembered. She is now so broken that she wants to change her name from “pleasant” to “bitter” and she doesn't hold back about the way she feels God has treated her. ‘Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.’

Many years ago, as a student I watched a powerful dance drama on the story of Ruth that I have never forgotten. It so poignantly illustrated the bitterness and brokenness of Naomi. Dressed in black, aged with pain and worry, dishevelled, looking only within and broken. But as lights dimmed at the end of the first scene there was a glimmer on the horizon ... “the barley harvest was beginning”. Even in the darkness something was beginning to grow.

Was it the right decision to return? Wasn't her situation beyond the redemption of God who seemingly had abandoned her? Would there be more trauma ahead?

Well you'll have to wait until next week to discover more unless you read on for yourselves!!

It's a powerful, emotional story – and I'm sure you may have had many thoughts as we've looked at it but here are three things that particularly spoke to me

- Is God asking me to pour out my heart to God – to be completely honest with him and my feelings and to stop bottling them up? That won't be easy.
- Am I prepared to trust God when everything around me is suggesting otherwise?
- Is there someone who God wants me to accompany through their dark path?

Father God, take these words and apply them to our lives and give us the courage to respond as you are challenging us to do so. Amen

Rev. E. Blackmore