

Sunday August 25th Ruth 4 – John 16: 16-24

Prayer: Lord we thank you for the gift of your Word and as we think on these things open our hearts and minds to hear your word to us. Amen

I don't think I had realised just how many cliff-hangers there are in the book of Ruth – but it's been great story that hopefully has captured our imaginations and shown us more about God working in everyday lives.

Let's have a brief recap before we commence the final episode.

Episode 1 – was a time of absolute desperation for Naomi; they had moved to a foreign land which had held such promise but ended in tragedy with the loss not just of her husband but also her two sons. It was so desperate she decided to change her name from Naomi – meaning pleasant - to Mara – bitterness.

But even in this darkness there were signs of hope, particularly seen in the love, loyalty and commitment of her daughter in law Ruth who was prepared to leave her own people and country and trust in a God who had seemingly let them down. They enter Bethlehem, dejected, poor, disillusioned but it was the beginning of the barley harvest.

Episode 2 – Ruth sets to work – doing what she could to keep them alive but in an amazing coincidence – or rather God incidence - Ruth went to glean in the field of Boaz – a distant relative – who welcomed and accepted her and prayed for her safety and security – not fully appreciating at the time that he himself was the answer to his prayer.

In last week's penultimate episode – Naomi had a somewhat risky plan for Ruth; Ruth was to go to Boaz at the threshing floor during night and ask him to act as their "Kinsman Redeemer". According to their law, this was the duty of the nearest male relative to restore all their family fortunes, provide a husband for Ruth and re-establish Naomi's husband's name. Ruth humbly follows her mother-in-law's instructions which weren't without risk to herself.

Everything was going to plan – apart from the one thing Naomi had overlooked; there was a nearer relative who had the first right to redeem the land and marry Ruth. Boaz, being an upright man, wanted to do everything according to the law, but it meant he risked losing Ruth – the girl he had come to admire and love.

And so we ended on another cliff-hanger. How would this other relative respond? Would he insist on his rights – and gain land? Would there be a marriage of convenience or love?

As Naomi and Ruth discuss it Naomi wisely advises Ruth not to worry but to – wait. I'm sure we all find it easier to worry than to wait. It may be a short word – but waiting is so difficult.

Naomi was confident that Boaz would sort the issue that day – but sometimes we are called to wait longer. I know that in several homes last Wednesday night was a night of worry – what would those GCSE results hold?

No more scheming... but waiting. And, possibly more frustrating – it was over to the men to sort things out!

But Boaz didn't waste any time in seeking to do so. He went straight to the town gate – the place of business – conversation and justice. And at just the right time the other relative came along! I think that was probably another God incidence rather than coincidence!

Boaz was a man of integrity; he wanted to do everything right in the eyes of God and the law and so he gathered witnesses and sat to talk to this closer relative; he meant business. He reminded him of his responsibility to redeem the land on behalf of Naomi but reveals his own willingness to do so if this closer relative doesn't want to.

There's a moment of great tension. The closer relative jumps at the idea ... and that wasn't the outcome we were expecting - and for a moment we wonder if all the build-up between Boaz and Ruth has been for nothing!

But patiently Boaz spells it out; it's not just land, it's marriage to Ruth – the Moabite – the foreigner. It's not for his own benefit but to maintain Elimelek's name.

Now that was a step too far. It would endanger his own estate and no doubt his reputation. Perhaps he already had an heir or the thought of marrying a Moabite was too degrading. It was too costly to him and so this nameless relative hands over the responsibility to Boaz.

It's strange isn't it – the relative who was scared to lose his name is the one who a few thousand years later we don't have a name for – but Boaz - the one who was prepared to lose it is remembered!

Boaz is freed to do what was his heart desired. Yes it was costly – but love sees the cost as something more than worth paying.

Redemption is costly. The greatest redemption that ever took place was Jesus redeeming us back to God – but what a terrible cost that was to God himself. His own son – degraded and humiliated as a criminal - dying on a cross for us. It cost everything – but the God of love who desired human relationship knew it was a cost worth paying.

At the city gate that day the celebrations started – but there was more to come! The elders at the gate pour out a blessing first on Ruth and then on Boaz. (I love that – the woman, the stranger is blessed first – how God loves to reverse our order and that of the culture!!)

I don't know if you noticed, I missed it initially that the book of Ruth is full of blessings! There's at least one in every chapter. Naomi blessed her daughters in law right at the beginning; Boaz blesses Ruth as she gleans in the field; Naomi blesses Boaz and then Ruth as she ventures out in the night to meet Boaz and now there're blessings from the folk around.

Could it be that as we bless others – pray for God's blessing and protection to be on them – we discover that God blesses us too!

We are reaching the end of the story; Ruth – the childless widow - gives birth to a son. But still her loving self-sacrifice shines through as something strange then happens. It's Naomi – rather than Ruth – who becomes the mum at the centre of all of the attention!

We recall the absolute devastation that the villagers had observed as Naomi returned to Bethlehem. It had been such a despondent, hopeless case. Suddenly all that has vanished and now Naomi's joy is spontaneous – you just couldn't wipe the smile off her face! No mention of Mara and bitterness now – gone forever.

It was that huge contrast in Naomi that I saw in a dance drama of this story many years ago that had greatest impact. From being bitter and broken, dressed in black, aged with pain and worry, dishevelled, looking only within and broken – she becomes a colourful lady, freely moving,

rejoicing in the company of others. Who says older ladies can't dance – you wouldn't dare to stop her!

Her joy was so much greater because of the pain she went through. She discovered that God can transform any and every situation – in His time - even the ones which seem the most desolate. Life is full of ups and downs – we go through dark periods of pain and sorrow but there will be ones of joy and happiness – in time – eventually. We need to keep looking up – the best is yet to come and never let go of hope.

There was nothing so desolate as death of Jesus. It was a dark in every aspect that Friday as he hung on the cross – but it wasn't the end - Sunday was coming with all its resurrection hope – and we are people of the resurrection.

If you're broken hearted today, God has good news for you that says, 'weeping may endure for the night but joy cometh in the morning.' It may not be the next morning but it will be one morning.

The story of Ruth would have been a great story if it ended there – but it doesn't – it goes even further! Their son - Obed which means servant of the Lord – becomes the father of Jesse who no one anticipated would become the father of the greatest and most loved King of Israel – King David. And if that isn't enough – there's even more – because David was the ancestor of Jesus himself!

Had Ruth had stayed in her homeland who knows what the end story would have been. But she reached out, despite all the odds being against it, and trusted in the God of Israel. She gave of herself to bless others and that blessing was returned in ways she could never have imagined. Boaz sacrificed much too but he too received blessing after blessing.

Jim Elliott wrote – He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose. Ruth and Boaz both gave – but they gained so much. Are we going to hold tightly to things or to give generously and let God surprise us with how he blesses us too.

I don't know what your lasting memory will be from this story of Ruth.

- Trusting God when all else tells you not to?
- Learning to wait God's time?
- Selflessly giving to others?
- Holding on to the hope of the joy which God alone can give?

Let's take a few moments of silence as maybe you find one thing you would like to take from this story.

Prayer: Father God – thank You that You redeemed us at such great cost to Yourself. Help us to trust You even when it's challenging to do so. Thank You that You turn pain into joy. Whatever we are feeling now may we never lose hold of the hope of the resurrection. As we feel Your love may that love may that love flow through us to others. Amen

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