

Sunday 8 November

Reading: Ruth 3:1-9; 4:13-17

Ruth – the story continues.

Last week we heard the beginning of the story, of this family which moved from Bethlehem into foreign territory, Moab, in search of food, and found life and death. The sons married local girls, but then the three men, father and sons, all died, leaving three widows in a very precarious existence. When Naomi decided to return to her home town, Ruth her daughter-in-law refused to leave her, but insisted on going with her.

“Where you go, I will go, where you lodge I will lodge, your people will be my people and your God my God.” When Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem, Naomi is bitter and full of despair – she tells the women who welcome her home:

“no longer call me Naomi (pleasant) but call me Mara (bitter)”.

It is the beginning of the barley harvest, and Ruth the Moabite says to Naomi, “I will go and glean in the fields” so that they will have food to eat. As it happens, Ruth goes to the field owned by Boaz, a close relative of her late father-in-law. Boaz has heard of Ruth and her loyalty to Naomi, and when he finds that she is working in his field, he tells her to keep working there behind his workers, and offers her his protection. When Naomi hears what has happened she is delighted, and she blesses Boaz for the kindness he has shown to Ruth.

And so it continued until the end of the wheat harvest in early summer. But what would happen to these two women when work and food were finished?

Ruth 3:1-9 Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, ‘My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you. 2 Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing-floor. 3 Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing-floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. 4 When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do.’ 5 She said to her, ‘All that you tell me I will do.’

6 So she went down to the threshing-floor and did just as her mother-in-law had instructed her. 7 When Boaz had eaten and drunk, and he was in a contented mood, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came quietly and uncovered his feet, and lay down. 8 At midnight the man was startled and turned over, and there, lying at his feet, was a woman! 9 He said, ‘Who are you?’ And she answered, ‘I am Ruth, your servant; spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin.’

Ruth had put herself in a very compromising situation, at Naomi’s instruction. Exactly how much sexual innuendo there is in the phrase “uncovered his feet” we don’t know for sure, but clearly Ruth was propositioning Boaz to some extent, asking for his on-going protection, maybe even proposing to him. Boaz responds positively and honourably, not taking advantage of the situation, but committing himself to resolve it in the morning. Because there is an unforeseen complication – another relative with more right than Boaz to the family inheritance, and that needs to be sorted out. Ruth stays with Boaz through the night, but leaves before it is light in the morning, taking away more grain. And that morning Boaz makes good his promise. He goes to the city gate, where business affairs are transacted, and speaks with the nearer relative, who is interested in the land, but not when he hears that with it comes Ruth the Moabite, widow of the dead man. This could compromise his own inheritance, and he turns down the offer. So Boaz declares in front of every one

“today you are witnesses that today I have acquired the land belonging to Elimelech and his sons, and I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite, wife of Mahlon, to be my wife, to maintain the dead man’s name on his inheritance”

And so the story comes to its happy ending:

Ruth 4:13-17 13 So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the Lord made her conceive, and she bore a son. 14 Then the women said to Naomi, ‘Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! 15 He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him.’ 16 Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. 17 The women of the neighbourhood gave him a name, saying, ‘A son has been born to Naomi.’ They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.

Sermon

History is usually written 'from above'. It is most concerned with rulers and leaders, with the centres of power and the way that power is exercised. It is almost always written from the perspective of men, and of rich powerful men. Women have come to recognise this and talk about writing alternative history - "herstory" - to record the rest of the story, the unseen untold part of the story, the way events unfolded for the little people, the unimportant people, the marginalised people.

The Bible doesn't escape this bias towards the powerful and the important. There is a lot in it about the wars that were fought, the land that was conquered or lost, the laws that were enacted, the rebellions and conspiracies and machinations that put people into power or removed them from power. And by 'people' I mean, almost always, men. And although, in the bible, the political history is told most often through a religious lens, it doesn't make much difference – the centre of attention is often on the temple and the sacrifices offered there and the priests who serve there.

But although that is most often true, it is not always so. And so we come to the book of Ruth, tucked in between Judges (the rulers of Israel before the kings) and 1 Samuel (the story of the establishment of the monarchy). Here in four short chapters we have a glimpse of ordinary life, where famine forces families to move, where death puts women in a precarious position, where crops are grown and harvested and winnowed, where local property transactions happen at the city gate. Where women are still bundled up with property and passed around like chattels – but where women are also loyal and tough and honest and daring and are involved in some very risky behaviour.

But where is God in this story? Nowhere very obvious. God is not a major player. God is not doing anything "with strong hand and outstretched arm". God isn't even being praised or prayed to or implored or thanked, particularly. There is no direct communication with God or from God in this story. The name of God is mentioned, but in passing, and in third person. Boaz greets his workers in the field "The Lord be with you". "The Lord bless you" they reply (just as we began our service today). People use God's name to bless one another: "May the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge, reward you". Naomi sees God as responsible for the tragic events in her life, and the bitterness that has come on her. But she speaks about God, not to God. And when her life is turned around, her friends bless God for the way things have turned out and for the daughter-in-law who is worth more than seven sons.

And yet, God is present in this story, not up front, but behind the scenes, between the lines, in the happenstances, in the provision made for the poor, in the way people treat one another, in the ordinariness of work and love and business and marriage.

Behind the scenes and between the lines, God is present.

Did you notice?

Ruth just 'happened to' end up in the field that belonged to Boaz – and if you are like me, you will know that so often the coincidences and happenstances of life are the places where suddenly you realise God is present, that this is more than just an unexpected event. It seems like nothing more than coincidence that Ruth should go to that particular field to glean, but even embittered Naomi, when she hears, gets a gleam in her eye that says, "Maybe God hasn't given up on me after all".

But what about gleaning itself - which is central to this story. This is part of the Jewish law, part of God's provision for those who have no land, who are on the margins of society, who have no direct access to the society in which they live. Gleaning provided a way for them to share in the bounty of the harvest. In Leviticus the law said:

When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the LORD your God.¹

And the same law in Deuteronomy explicitly refers to orphans and widows among the poor.²

God's concern for the widow, orphan and foreigner, the least, the little ones, the overlooked ones, was to be part of the way that God's people lived. The people were to share God's concern for the most vulnerable among them. So

¹ Leviticus 19:9-10; 23:22

² Deuteronomy 24:19-22

Ruth, a widow, a foreigner, a Moabite, is in a position to share in God's provision as she goes out into the field to glean.

God is present in the patterns of life and work that shape the ordinary everyday community in which this story takes place.

There is another thread woven through the story of Ruth that reveals God at the heart of this story. It is the word *hesed*³ - the steadfast, loyal, covenant love that Israel always held to be one of the defining characteristics of God. It is translated sometimes as 'lovingkindness' or 'mercies'. Look at Psalm 136 with its constant refrain, every second line – "God's steadfast love endures forever" – that's *hesed*.

In the story of Ruth, *hesed* is seen in action, in the loyalty and love that the characters have for each other. Naomi, even in her bitterness, recognises the kindness (*hesed*) that her daughters-in-law have shown to her, and asks God to extend the same loving-kindness to them. Ruth's commitment to Naomi demonstrates the extent of such loyal love

"Wherever you go I will go – your people will be my people"⁴.

Even in the face of Naomi's bitterness, Ruth remains committed to Naomi's well-being, refusing to leave her. And as the story progresses, Ruth continues to show loving kindness and faithful loyalty to Naomi, ready to do whatever it takes to provide for her needs, through hard work in the fields, through risky behaviour on the threshing floor.

We can see *hesed* at work in Boaz's kind and considerate actions towards Ruth and through her to Naomi – that's what Naomi identifies when she hears how he has treated Ruth. And Boaz' action is in response to what he has seen of Ruth's commitment towards Naomi – he told Ruth that he had already heard everything that she had done for her mother-in-law, leaving her own people and land, seeking refuge under the wings of the God of Israel. Boaz speaks again of Ruth's *hesed* when he recognises her loyalty to Naomi in the risk she took to come to him in the night after the harvest.

The final fruit of the *hesed* Ruth has demonstrated is the birth of her son, who is fed and cuddled by Naomi, bitter no longer. And then as the credits roll at the very end, we discover – this baby is not just any baby. This baby will have a son who will have a son who will be David, the greatest of Israel's kings. So it is that this seemingly simple ordinary story suddenly becomes part of the bigger story, the official history. Ruth the Moabite, the widow, the foreigner, becomes the mother of kings. And in the genealogy of David's descendant, as Matthew records it, we find Ruth named and recognised again – the legacy of *hesed*, of committed love and loyalty is ultimately seen in the birth of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, *hesed* made flesh.

Where do we find God in our ordinary lives?

There are times when God can be powerfully present in unmistakable ways. But in the ordinary times, in day to day living, do we recognise God's presence there? The book of Ruth reminds us of the ways in which God is present in our ordinary living. When people commit themselves to the wellbeing of those around them, in faithful love, ready to work hard and to take risks so that those they love are cared for and provided for, there we see God's *hesed* at work. When the cry goes up for justice for the poor, the marginalised, the unprotected, there we are reminded of God's concern for the poor. When outsiders, foreigners, refugees, are given a place in the community, and the gifts and blessings come through them are recognised and celebrated, there we see the story of Ruth being replayed. When we pattern our living more and more on the way Jesus lived among us, showing kindness and compassion to people in need, loving our enemies and praying for those who attack us, reaching out to welcome strangers and outcasts, seeking not to be served but to serve, sharing what we have with open generosity, that is where God is with us, living in us and through us and around us.

This week, ask God to tune your awareness of where God is in your life, in the people you meet and in the coincidences that surprise you. And when you spot God there – tell someone about it. Share the story.

³ Ruth 1:2;2:20;3:10

⁴ Ruth 1:16