

Ruth 4 with Mat 1, 1-17 Hope restored with future hope to come...

24th Nov 2024

Prayer: Father God may you to speak to us through your word and in the power of your Holy Spirit this day. Amen.

Today we come to the end of the short story of Ruth. It may be a little book in the bible, but there is much to glean from it!

We have followed the story of Naomi and her family, we have seen the providential grace of God as Naomi moves from bitterness to joy, from emptiness to fulness. We have seen the character of God, his faithful and loving kindness, his compassion, and intervention in the lives of ordinary people, the marginalized women, foreigners, and widows. We've seen his character displayed in the behaviour of key characters in the story, Ruth, and Boaz. And we've seen his much greater plans and purposes coming about through the lives of these ordinary people, living in the ordinary town of Bethlehem.

In this final chapter, we see such joy and hope both for this little family who are redeemed by Boaz – but on a bigger scale we are pointed to the Saviour who is to come and redeem all humankind.

Last week we were left hanging at the end of chapter 3 after Ruth had basically proposed to Boaz, requesting him to spread his garment over her, taking on the responsibility as Kinsman redeemer for her and Naomi. To protect them and carry on the family name, to lift them from their lowly and destitute status as widows with no heirs.

We now move from the gleaning fields and the threshing floor to the city gate. Boaz had informed Ruth that there was a closer relative who had first responsibility and rights to redeem Naomi and Ruth. Boaz is a noble man of good character, so he wants to make sure that he does everything above board, although we get the sense that he is keen to marry Ruth himself.

The city gate was the centre of city life where people gathered for conversation, for the administration of justice, where the poor looked for aid and where the elders of society met. Boaz wasted no time looking for the relative of Naomi so that the matter of marriage and redemption could be settled quickly.

Ruth and Naomi were at home just waiting for the outcome. Naomi who had returned to Bethlehem in despair is now in anticipatory hope...Ruth was being loyal and faithful as she followed Naomi's instructions and put herself in Boaz's hands – but ultimately, she has placed herself in God's hands as she trusted in him. And God certainly has his hand on this little family...

At the gate it is not long before the guardian-redeemer comes along, and Boaz calls him over along with ten town elders as witnesses and explains to the man that his relative's widow Naomi is selling the piece of land belonging to her dead husband Elimelech and that he is first in line to buy it. If he doesn't want it, then Boaz is next in line.

Interestingly this is the first time we hear of this property...why wasn't it mentioned before? Had it been confiscated when the family moved away? Was Naomi as a widow not able to do anything with it but now in extreme poverty is at least able to sell it? We don't know, but there is land, and Boaz is clever in offering this to the kinsman first. The relative says yes to this offer, probably seeing it as a low risk, high reward investment...but then comes the added cost!

Boaz then tells him that part of the kinsman's redeeming responsibilities in purchasing the land include marrying the widow, Ruth. This relative hadn't factored that one in! Naomi was past childbearing age, so knew that he didn't have to worry about his responsibility there, but Ruth as Elimelech's daughter-in-law could possibly bear a child to carry on the family name.

At this news the relative changes his mind as it would be too costly for him and would endanger his own estate. He was probably married with children of his own who may then miss out on their inheritance.

He tells Boaz he can have the property and marry Ruth. The deal is sealed with the passing of the man's sandal to Boaz in the presence of the elders who are witnesses to the transaction. These days a handshake would probably suffice – or rather, papers drawn up and a legal contract signed!

We get the sense that Boaz is jubilant as he announces to everyone that he is now the owner of the property of Elimelech, and that Ruth is his wife so *that his name will not disappear from among his family or from his hometown. Today you are my witnesses!* He exclaims.

The other relative hadn't been willing to make the sacrifice and pay the cost of taking on Ruth and Naomi, but Boaz was. Right from when he first met Ruth when she went to glean wheat in his field, he had been doing his best to provide for and protect them. Now he was taking on full responsibility and it seems he was very pleased to do so! He acts with such loving kindness to these two women. We don't know what his familial situation was, but there is no mention of a wife or children, just that he is a man of means with property and workers and that he is older than Ruth.

Ruth and Naomi are not even at the gate to enjoy this transaction and to hear the following prayer and blessing by the elders and people that had gathered. They say to Boaz...

We are witnesses. May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the family of Israel. May you have standing in Ephrathah and be famous in Bethlehem. Through the offspring the Lord gives you by this young woman, may your family be like that of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah."

There have been many prayers and blessings in this story, and we see God honouring those prayers. Boaz blesses his workers, and they bless him. Boaz blesses and prays for Ruth that she will be richly rewarded for her loyalty and kindness to Naomi and now the elders and people pray an amazing prayer of blessing over Boaz and Ruth. They pray that Ruth will be like Rachel and Leah – these are Jacob's wives from whom the tribe of Israel, God's chosen people came. They pray that Boaz's name will be famous in Bethlehem and his family like that of Perez.

These prayers are answered! Did they know what they were praying? Did God put prophetic words in their mouths as they basically proclaimed what was to come, God's plans coming to fruition through the faithful lives of his chosen ones Ruth and Boaz.

We move from the prayer of the witnesses at the city gate to the epilogue of the story...we don't hear of Boaz returning to share the good news with Ruth and Naomi, but we can only imagine the joy and relief. Especially for Naomi, whose plans had come to fruition, and we imagine her praising God for

turning her bitterness to joy and her emptiness to fullness. We read that very soon her empty widowed, childless arms are to be filled with a grandchild.

Again, we see God's hand of blessing on this family as the people's prayers are answered. If you remember Ruth had been married to one of Naomi's sons for around 10 years and had not conceived or bore a child. We read here that as Boaz made love to her it was the Lord that enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. God had enabled Sarah with Abraham to conceive and have a son when it seemed impossible, but it was all in God's timing with the fulfilment of his promise and covenant with Abraham that he would be the father of many descendants...God's chosen people.

God continued to ensure that his line of chosen ones would continue, and the genealogies dotted throughout the bible enable us to follow God's line...there is a small genealogy at the end of Ruth ending in God's chosen King David. Open your bible to Matthew 1 (p 783 of pew bibles) and look at that genealogy we heard this morning. It begins with Abraham, and you can see Boaz and Ruth mentioned as grandparents of David and then it continues right down to the birth of Jesus – God's son, coming from the line of Judah – the King of Kings. It is fitting that we finish this book of Ruth on Christ the King Sunday!

Boaz was indeed famous throughout generations – as was Ruth! She is one of just a few women who are mentioned in this genealogy. What do these women have in common? Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth. You'll find the story of Tamar in Genesis 38, the widowed daughter-in-law of Judah who had been rejected by her brother in laws who were supposed to 'redeem' her like Boaz redeemed Naomi and Ruth. Tamar took things in her own hands and dressed as a prostitute and Judah, her father-in-law made love to her unbeknownst to him...but she was blessed for this and gave birth to Perez.

Then Rahab is mentioned – do you remember who she was? We find her in Joshua 2, a prostitute hiding the spies sent over to survey the city of Jericho! She was also a foreigner who put her trust in the Lord and married an Israelite and the genealogy says she is the mother of Boaz.

And then we come to Ruth, a widowed foreigner from Moab who becomes the grandmother of King David.

I think it is just wonderful that these three women are named in Matthew's genealogy. They weren't named in the one at the end of Ruth. We see how

God truly chooses and uses the unlikely ones, the marginalized, the weak, the outcast, and the gentiles bringing them into his fold. They too are the chosen ones. Jesus comes from a line that is filled with what some may consider pure scandal. It is God's scandalous grace! Jesus is then born of Mary, an ordinary young woman, who herself faces scandal when she conceives through the Holy Spirit out of wedlock. God's grace in these situations reminds us to be slow to judge the outward appearance and circumstance, but rather look on the heart and be quick to welcome and offer grace.

As we finish this wonderful book of Ruth let us return to the story of Naomi who had felt so empty and bitter when she returned to Bethlehem and been greeted by the women of the town. The story finishes with those same women now rejoicing with her and praising the Lord who has blessed Naomi with a guardian redeemer to renew and sustain her life. And thanking God for her daughter-in-law Ruth, who was considered better than seven sons! What high praise.

What a witness this story is to the character of God. His loving kindness, his using ordinary people, through ordinary situations, turning grief into joy and always with his hand upon the big story with his plan to send Jesus as the ultimate Saviour redeemer. Jesus, who (without counting the cost) came to rescue the sinner, the lost, the ordinary, the poor, to set the captive free. Jesus, born in the same town as Obed, Bethlehem, the house of Bread. Jesus who declared that he is the bread of life, who offers us abundant and eternal life. Jesus calls us to come to him and be filled.

And God chooses us- ordinary people like Ruth and Boaz, in ordinary places to show loving kindness and loyalty and faithfulness to bless others. Just like the members of the Red Frog team among us today, shining the light of Christ on the streets and beaches of Cowes this week. God offers us shelter and protection, he renews, fills, and sustains our lives. Will you come to him today, receive his grace and show grace to others inviting them to come under his wings.

Let us pray: (from a prayer at the end of the Bible Speaks Today commentary)

Our Father in heaven, Creator and Sustainer of your world, you hold all that you have made within your gracious providence. We thank you for the rich

freedom you have given us. Help us in all things to see your hand, and to live as those whose lives are entrusted to your sovereign care. As Ruth from Moab became one of your people, so you call us by name and invite us home. We are glad to find shelter under the refuge of your wings.

In Jesus Christ, our Kinsman-Redeemer, you meet us in our ordinariness and make our human life your own. We thank you for your costly self-giving in redeeming love, setting us free to share the life of your family. You have taken our pains, our sin, our bitterness, our fear, to yourself. Forgive us our sins and teach us how to forgive. Grant that when, like Naomi, we walk the valley of tears in the evening and the dark, we may not lose sight of the resurrection dawn of hope and joy.

Through the Holy Spirit, the giver of life, you lead us into truth. You enrich the guidance of your law through the personal warmth of your generous love. As Boaz went beyond the call of duty in gracious provision for another's need, how much is your gift of grace far more abundant than we could ask or think! Teach us to be alert to the needs of others, and to work for a just distribution of the rich bounty of your world, that each may have daily bread for daily need.

God the Holy Trinity, from you each earthly family receives its name and learns its love. You are the God of history whose purposes span the centuries. Through your family the church you now make known your plan to unite all things in heaven and earth in Jesus Christ our Lord. Before him, one day, every knee will bow. We give you our praise, we ask for your aid, and we seek to bring all aspects of our lives under the rule of Christ our Lord. For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.