

Ruth 1

Mark 12. 28-34

The book of Ruth contains what must be one of the most tender and poignant passages in scripture. We have read it today.

*Do not press me to leave you  
or to turn back from following you!  
Where you go, I will go;  
where you lodge, I will lodge;  
your people shall be my people,  
and your God my God.  
Where you die, I will die —  
there will I be buried.  
May the Lord do thus and so to me,  
and more as well, if even death parts me from you!*

In the face of the loss of everything that Naomi and Ruth and Orpah have known there is this deep commitment and faithfulness which emerges in their abandonment.

Ruth is a little book; a short story rather than what you might call a history, although it lies in the midst of the histories: it comes after Joshua and Judges and before the books of Samuel and Kings. The story has a hint of legend about it in the way in which it begins; a hint of the timelessness you get in fairytales: *In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land ...* While it is a beautiful story in itself, it seems to me that the Book of Ruth is placed where it is to be a little thorn in the side; a question mark hanging over Israel's notions of ethnic and religious purity. The books of Joshua and Judges and Samuel and Kings are full of stories of how wonderfully God wiped away all the foreigners in the way of Israel occupying the Promised Land. Ruth is a story which inserts a glitch in the story of the progress of Israel and its pride in its chosen-ness and purity.

Ruth is a story about shame in the family closet and how a faithfulness toward God and to another, who according to tradition and law should be shunned, is the means of redemption and salvation. It's a story about love of God and neighbour – even the neighbour who is considered to be enemy and beyond the pale.

Ruth and Orpah, Naomi's two daughters-in-law, were Moabites. Moab was a land which comprised fertile plains surrounding the city of Jericho. It was on the plains of Moab on the East side of the Jordan that the wandering tribes of Israel stopped before they entered the Promised Land; it was on the plains of Moab that the book of Deuteronomy tells us Moses gave his last commandments to the people before they entered that land, a place they had anticipated for forty years; it was in Moab that Moses died and was buried; and it was Jericho, a city in Moab, which was the first conquest of the Israelites' violent entering into and possessing the Promised

Land in the name of God. Moab in a sense was symbol of Israel's transition to nation under God. It is to *this* place that the famished Elimelech, whose name means *my God is king*, and Naomi must go. Their lives and existence hang in the balance and they return to this significant, formative place.

But Moab is not a good place to go to because the memory of its people are a deep source of shame and loathing in the Jewish memory. The people of Moab were descended from Lot, the nephew of Abraham. You might remember that Lot accompanied Abraham when he left Haran and travelled out into the wilderness in obedience to the promise to Abraham of land and descendants – as numerous as the stars in the sky. You may also remember the story of the destruction Sodom and Gomorrah, whatever it is that that strange story is about, and the turning of Lot's wife into a pillar of salt, as Abraham and Lot and their families fled from the destruction - because Lot's wife disobeyed the command not to look back on the two cities as they were destroyed. The aftermath of the destruction Sodom and Gomorrah is like some apocalyptic landscape; as though the world has ended and there seems to be no one remaining. Like Naomi's sons die in Ruth's story, Lot's sons-in-law are also killed in the aftermath of the events at Sodom and Gomorrah. The daughters are without husbands.

In this place of destruction Lot's two daughters reflect together in their desperation about the fact that they cannot now have children because they are husbandless, saying to each other: *there is not a man on earth to come in to us after the manner of all the world*. So in order to procreate they get their father drunk and have intercourse with him. And they produce a son each: Moab and Ammon – children of incest. They become the fathers of the Moabites and the Ammonites. The memory of this unnatural act lies deep in the Israelites feelings about the Moabites – so much so that the abhorrence of it is enshrined in the law of Moses.

In the latter part of the book of Deuteronomy the relationship with the Moabites is proscribed in this way:

*Those born of an illicit union shall not be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.*

*No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord,*

The book of Deuteronomy tells the story of Moses preparing his people for entering into the land of Promise by giving them laws by which to live. Their relations with each other and with foreigners are very carefully mapped out – even to the tenth generation. Now for the Israelites the number ten has apocalyptic connotations or a sense of completeness or absoluteness about it. So in the light of this prohibition there is no question that relations with the Moabites should ever be entertained.

So the story of Ruth unfolds in the light of this shameful memory of the seduction by the daughters of Lot of their father and the very clear legal prohibition of any contact with the Moabites. As ancient Jewish story tellers began to tell this story their hearers' ears would have

pricked up because to hear that the protagonist of the story has to go to Moab is sign that they are brought very low in this going to a place of deep shame – yet it becomes a place through which salvation comes. I think probably Ruth is a little historical parable; a kind of stick-up-the-nose story where the Israelites notions of racial and religious purity are challenged or provoked. While it is a story of great beauty and poignancy, in its own right, it is also a story which is told in the way it is and placed where it is in scripture for a reason; there to challenge and remind. We'll hear more next week of how the story unfolds.

Looking at Ruth in this way reminds us that we cannot just take scripture at face value; if we were to do so than it's clear that Elimelech – *my God is king* – should not have gone to Moab under any circumstances. The very absolute moral prohibition about contact with the Moabites is the black and white take on the world that infects the religious life all too easily. But we know that life is not so simple and doesn't unfold for us in clear moral categories; sometimes we find ourselves travelling through what we once thought was morally ambiguous country because deep love for another or faithfulness to them leads us there. The love of neighbour tempers what is sometimes a too-fierce love of God.

We have heard the two great commandments in Mark today. It comes in a non-hostile engagement between Jesus and a religious scribe. Jesus puts two commandments together and says these two are the most important. The love of God is meaningless without the love of neighbour. A too fierce love of God can push us toward fundamentalism and mistreatment of others made in the image of God. At heart this is really what the story of Ruth is trying to say – that Israel's love of God had become too exclusive, too extreme, too violent, too unwelcoming.

The challenging thing for us as we delve into scripture in order to reflect on our own lives is that we cannot just take it at face value – it is in some sense in the messy and contradictory whole that the pearls are to be found.

We have left the story of Ruth at a low point today. Naomi tells her old friends in Bethlehem that life has been unimaginably bad:

*the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me.  
I went away full,  
but the Lord has brought me back empty;  
why call me Naomi  
when the Lord has dealt harshly with me,  
and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?*

If you look at the stories of descent and then ascent in scripture; stories of being brought down and then lifted up; stories of death through to life, you will see that the descent is necessary before the ascent. It is only in the being brought to a place of utter abandonment that life's priorities become absolutely clear and a path through may be found. I imagine for the Jewish Naomi to have her sons take Moabite wives would have been a source of shame and ambivalence. But only in her own and the daughters-in-laws' abandonment in death, could a bond such as we have heard in the story be formed. And as we hear the story progress next week

it is through Ruth's unshakeable faithfulness that redemption comes; of Naomi; of Ruth; and of the nation of Israel.

It is the pattern of the God whom we worship to break through our firmly held loyalties and loathings and bring love out of hate, friendship out of enmity, life out of death.

As we mark All Saints' Day may we say thanks be to God for those ancestors in the faith, some very ancient, some more intimately known to us, who have through their faithfulness to God made known to us the love and redeeming power of the eternal God. And we can be thankful and rest in the abiding and redeeming love.

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