

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 10 OCTOBER 2010

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

Ruth 1: 1 – 18; Mark 12: 28 - 34

“Loss and Love and Moving on”

There once was a family of economic refugees. Although they originated from a town that was called Bethlehem, which could be translated as “house of bread”, they had been hit by famine and decided to try their luck elsewhere. So they fled to a country where the food situation was better and they weren't too fussy about who they let in and why. There was still some room for entrepreneurial people who were prepared to put their backs into building a better future for themselves and pay some taxes in the bargain.

Unfortunately things didn't go very well for them at all. The head of the family dies young, leaving his wife with two sickly boys to raise on her own. Their names Machlon and Kiljon, mean sickness and consumption, and that should tell you enough. She does an admirable job though and, once they've grown up, even manages to marry them off to decent women. Then the boys die as well. And Naomi, whose name means “the lovely one”, is left with two daughters in law and no men to provide for the three of them.

God in all of this stays very quiet. It all seems to just happen, event after dreadful event. No wonder this lovely woman will, in a couple of verses, refer to herself as Mara, bitterness. Because it is all bitterness she has to swallow, the taste of her life not sweet, nor lovely.

Then it says, she gets up, and avid Bible readers will start to listen attentively here because when somebody gets up in the Bible something is usually about to happen, the story is about to take another direction.

And it does.....

From a story about people who try to carve out a bit of a living but fail through an accumulation of misfortune, the story from here on starts to move towards a happy ending. There will be a big wedding and a grandchild sitting on Naomi's lap in another couple of chapters, and more...

Naomi does not realise this of course. She at this stage is probably just desperately looking for a way out. News gets to her that back home in Bethlehem the barley harvest will be good this year. It looks like the house of bread will be filled once more with an abundance of food. And Naomi decides to move back. Widows and orphans receive better care in Israel than in Moab. So it is a very sensible decision to make.

It can't have been easy for her though. One can just imagine the welcome that awaits her: Hello Naomi, back to enjoy the good life? Things didn't work out in Moab did they? Want a slice of our cake now do you?

At first she decides to take her two daughters in law with her, but then she changes her mind. They might be better off with their own families she must have thought, and she herself probably more welcome without two extra mouths to feed. The future is bleak for all of them. The families of Ruth and Orpha will probably not be too happy to see them return. Another mouth to feed and little

prospect of marrying them off profitably. In Bethlehem the only option is begging for mercy.

Then Naomi decides it is probably for the best if she lets her daughters in law go (even though they probably had an obligation under the law to stay with her) and sends them back to their old homes.

One obeys, Orpha. She is a nice and sensible girl. She weeps, kisses Naomi goodbye and goes. She understands Naomi will probably be better off without two women in trail. And that she might be happier in the house of her father with other women she knows.

Ruth however refuses to leave Naomi. And make no mistake here: Naomi is not very grateful for this. It says she turns her back on Ruth, not to speak to her again until well after they have arrived in Bethlehem. Who is going to help her now, she must have thought, turning up after so many years with this headstrong alien woman in trail?

However, it is here, in the rebellious, decisive and very poignant words Ruth utters that God appears on the scene for the first time.

In Ruth's reckless rebelliousness God features for the first time in this story: "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 will die, I will die, there will I be buried".

There are echoes here of the covenant between God and Abraham, the covenant between God and the people of Israel. The promise of a loyalty, of a unison that cannot be broken by fate or fortune, of faithfulness that goes way beyond ordinary love and affection.

Ruth, a foreigner, speaks godly words.

It is not sensible what Ruth does, nor is it logical. Logical would have been to go back to her family and just live with the fact that she is a childless widow with only a slim chance of ever marrying again. Sensible would have been to listen to her mother in law and let her go to wherever she came from to find support with family and old friends.

Why adopt another country, another God, and why accept a death far from home?

A leap of faith, skydiving into the unknown without a parachute, that is what Ruth does. Because, after all, what does she know about her new country except that Naomi wants to return to it? What does she know about this God, apart from the fact that his Kingship doesn't seem to involve protection against misfortune?

And yet.....

With a solemn vow Ruth throws in her lot with a woman who has misfortune written all over her. She dedicates herself to a country she only knows from hearsay and puts her life in the hands of a God she barely knows and that so far has not been an awfully big help to her or her mother in law.

And by doing this she, the outsider, takes centre stage. She gets an important part to play, not only in Naomi's life, not only in the life of the love she'll find in Bethlehem, but in the history of Israel, even the world.

Great grand mother to King David, great great great grandmother to our Lord Jesus Christ.

One can wonder where God is when one looks at one's own journey through life or that of others. Neither Naomi nor Ruth probably had a clue about what the eventual outcome of their doings would be. Most of it they would never even get to see. Naomi would probably have shrugged her shoulders with a bitter smile when contemplating the name of her dead husband: Elimelech, God is King.

Ruth takes a gamble and with courage chooses loyalty and love for her mother in law and commitment to a God that has barely shown himself in her story so far. To discover that God has an important place at the ready for her in the house of bread. And a major part to play in the history of his people.

We gathered here this morning are like Ruth. And in circumstances that are probably much more favourable to this, we are called to confess to a faith that says that however little there sometimes is to see of it, God is here, working behind the scenes of history, not letting go, but creating new beginnings where love and loyalty and commitment are shared between people. As it happened in the lives of Ruth and Naomi, in between and sometimes even in spite of all that goes on in our lives, the logical and the sensible is not always the way that will be most fruitful for God's future to take shape. And that risk taking, traveling away from what is safe and secure, will sometimes bring us to a place where God's blessings will multiply. But we'll talk more about that when we hear about Ruth next time, two Sunday's from now, when she has arrived in Bethlehem and goes looking for mercy. Amen.