

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 24 OCTOBER 2010

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

Ruth 2; Leviticus 19:1-17; Psalm 142; John 13:1-5

“Sharing What is God’s”

Synopsis of Part 1 of Ruth's story

Two weeks ago we began reading the beautiful novella about Ruth the Moabite, which you will find in your bibles between the book of Judges and the book of 1Kings.

Today we will read the second chapter of the book.

For those of you who are not familiar with the story, I'll give a short recap of that first chapter. Naomi, her husband and two sons flee famine in Israel and go to live in Moab.

This doesn't prove to be a very happy escape though. Naomi's husband and both her sons die, leaving her and her two daughters-in-law without any livelihood. When Naomi hears circumstances in her home town Bethlehem have changed for the better, she decides to go back home to Bethlehem.

She releases her two daughters-in-law from their commitment to look after her. Probably because she hopes they might still be young enough to find other husbands and a new life in Moab, and will probably not be welcome in Bethlehem.

Ruth, one of the daughters-in-law, decides to stay with Naomi and share whatever fate is awaiting her, which, for her could mean opting for a life of begging and dependency upon people that have no commitment to her. The first chapter ends on a positive note: When they arrive in Bethlehem the harvest has just started and promises to be plentiful.

To place the reading from Ruth in context, we will also read part of the law of Moses that is found in Leviticus.

Part 2 “Sharing what is God’s”

Chapter 2 starts as chapter one ended, with a positive signal to us, the readers: “Now Naomi had a kinsman of her husbands side, a well-to-do man of the family of Elimelech; His name was Boaz.....”

So, we, as the readers, discover that Naomi still has a kinsman and a well-to-do kinsman of good character at that. This means that under Jewish law there is somebody Naomi and Ruth can appeal to, a kinsman, who, at least in theory, has an obligation to look after Naomi.....

The women however are not yet aware of this fact. And to them things must have looked rather bleak. There is barley and there is bread in Bethlehem, but will they be allowed to share in the new abundance Bethlehem is blessed with?

Naomi is old, probably too old to go out to work. Ruth is a Moabite, a descendant of the people that

refused Israel hospitality when they were in the desert. Because of this incident in the desert, Jewish law said that no Jew need ever offer hospitality to any descendant of Moab

As Ruth brings neither wealth nor work, power nor knowledge to compensate for her background, a warm welcome from the people of Israel is about the last thing she may expect. She is an undesirable who can only hope to be tolerated. Her only asset, Naomi, an old woman who left Bethlehem years ago and has since lost everything she had and who will herself have to wait and see if there will be any family or old friends prepared to take pity on her.

Ruth however shows that she is a resourceful woman, made of strong stuff, who is prepared to take on anything. "May I go out to the cornfields and glean behind anyone who will grant me that favour?"

Ruth intends to go out to look for favours, for mercy. Gleaning, behind the reapers, to get bread for Naomi and herself. Looking for charity in a foreign and, to her, hostile country.

"Yes, go my daughter" replies Naomi, and I think we may hear a sigh at the end of that. Living off charity is not easy, as anyone who has ever done so can tell you.

In our world, in our time, Ruth would be one of the people applying for a loan from the Credit Union, or she and her mother-in-law would be asylum seekers, economic refugees, claiming social security just hours after arriving in the country.

Ruth may expect to be looked down upon in the fields of Bethlehem.

A foreigner, a woman on her own, begging for mercy. There are no male relatives to defend her honour, no status to keep her from harm. Rudeness, sexual advances, and violence will almost certainly come her way, from people in Bethlehem who are better off than she is, as well as from other gleaners who might see her as an intruder who has come to take away what they think is rightfully theirs....

And Naomi of course knows this all too well.....

But Ruth goes, with her head held high. She asks politely if she may glean, and she is given permission to do so. Ruth finds mercy. With her face close to the ground she is allowed to work, gleaning what the reapers have failed to pick up.

Then, as it happens to happen, (the Hebrew doubles the word for accidental reasons to emphasise this should really not be put in brackets), Ruth is in that strip of the fields that belonged to Boaz of Elimelech's Family....

Yes, you heard that correctly: quite emphatically the text tells us this is all happening accidentally. Ruth is led to this particular field neither by the power of the Lord, nor through His divine Providence. The bible is very careful about ascribing things to Divine providence anyway, but the book of Ruth even more so. More careful that is, than some of us.

Like the death of Naomi's husband and sons; Ruth's choice to stay with her mother-in-law; the field where she goes to glean. Chance, co-incidence, things falling apart and coming together. God is there, but in the background, watching and maybe helping here and there.

And look, again it happens to happen that Boaz comes down to see how his land lies. He enters like a king onto the stage of our story, wandering around his field, greeting and blessing people as he goes:

The Lord be with you..... And also with you.... Pious words of a pious man. Words that are happily returned to him by those who work for him. A good atmosphere pervades the business of harvesting a plentiful crop.

Anybody that has ever helped with harvesting, fruit, grapes, wheat, what ever, will recognise this feeling of joyful labouring together. The cheerful welcome for the person who brings lunch or the owner of the land who comes to see how things are going.

And suddenly Boaz sees somebody he does not know. He calls his supervisor and asks: 'Whose is this young woman?' Not: who but *whose*..... He assumes she is owned, a chattel, and been made to do what she does. Why else would a beautiful young woman like that go, on her own, to glean barley in a field full of coarse harvesters?

The supervisor tells him the story. The story of the faithfulness of a foreign woman to her mother-in-law. The story of a woman who has sought refuge under the wings of the God of Israel. A story that he finishes with praise: 'She came and has been on her feet with hardly a moment's rest from daybreak till now.' This woman is made of the right stuff, she works, hard, for a living, to take care of a woman she has committed herself and her future to.

Having heard this Boaz loses no time and goes straight up to Ruth: 'Listen, don't go anywhere else, keep close to my girls, the men have orders not to molest you. And if you are thirsty, go and drink from the jars the men have filled.....

What he says is equivalent to saying: 'I invite you to be one of us, one of my girls, part of the community of people working here on this field, sharing in the food and water that is put out for us, safe from any harassment by the men.

Through Boaz's words Ruth is changed from outcast to worker, a guest to be looked after in Boaz's field. Boaz who came upon the stage with words of blessing, makes this blessing a tangible reality for the widow from Moab.

Ruth is very grateful, she prostrates herself before him on the ground. But even so, she wants to know why these favours are extended to her. You never know of course what this man might have in mind.....

Then Boaz tells Ruth her own story with words echoing with words from the story of Abraham, the father of all Israelites, who, like her, left his land and family to become one of the Lord's people. It is as if Boaz is saying: 'for me you are a person like our father Abraham.' And with that Boaz incorporates Ruth into the people of Israel, the children of Abraham.

Through his words Ruth is transformed from a down and out into a valued guest, from an undesirable alien into a fellow country woman, from a degradable nobody into a person of worth and stature.

Boaz matches word and action: He invites Ruth to his own table, she receives food to eat and the crop she gleans gets larger because Boaz instructs his reapers to drop a few extra ears so that Ruth won't go short. He also tells his reapers to treat Ruth with respect. He shows to be of Messianic Character, this Boaz, the Messiah who also matched his actions and his words.

It is the law in Israel, not to reap the edges of a field, not to gather in every last bit of the harvest, but to leave some out there for the poor, the widow, the orphan and the alien. The land is God's; the

crop comes from his hand. It is written in the Law of Moses that nobody shall be poor amongst the people of God. Poor people are entitled to their share, the yield of a crop is never yours alone.

In the countries around Israel, in Canaan and with the Philistines, part of the harvest was also left out on the land. Not for the poor though, but for the gods, as an offering to soften their hearts. God tells his people to give that offering to the poor. It means that whoever serves them serves God, and gives God what is his due.

It is called justice, not charity, but justice.

Boaz understands that very well: he understands that the wealth he has received is there to serve others. He feels a responsibility to give shape to God's mercy and protection for Ruth. He saves the oppressed, he feeds the poor, he helps the stranger in distress, the widow and the fatherless, to speak with words of one of the hymns we are singing today. And in doing so, the Messiah shows his face in the face of this fore-father of the Messiah who serves God with everything that he has.

A willingness to serve and share, is a type of justice that is also expected of us, followers of the Messiah. Like Boaz, we should not keep everything to ourselves, from our 'crops', from what we earn, but understand that part of this is for sharing with the needy. Not through charity, but through understanding that this is justice.

As there were then, in today's world there are people coming to us, looking for mercy and respect, like Ruth came to Boaz on his field. They come and ask for support, for food, for salvation from their plight. They ask for respect, for a better future, for justice, for people who are prepared to understand that the abundance God has blessed them with is not theirs to take, but given to share.

Jesus, at the table of the Last Supper lays aside his garments, the things that signify his status, and kneels to love, serve and share even with the one (Judas) who is making life impossible for him. He takes love, respect and sharing much further than Boaz did, out past the very limit of life itself.

There is most probably a lot of work to be done before we will be just a bit like Boaz or Jesus. But even if we succeed in letting our lives be shaped by the desire to let the qualities they showed shine through in our lives, the world will be a better place. Even if we only succeed in letting our own awareness be raised and raise in our children the awareness of the plight of others and how we might best respect, support and care for them, God's kingdom will spread. Even if we only share a little bit of our abundance and choose a lifestyle that is not completely controlled by the accumulation of more wealth and security for our own, God's law can begin to shape a world that is more generous and caring for all who inhabit it. Amen.