

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 31 OCTOBER 2010

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

Ruth 3; Leviticus 25:23-28; Deuteronomy 25:5-10; Psalm: 61; Philippians 1:6-11

"Friendship, Decision, Fulfillment"

We don't know what Ruth thought or felt when she came to Bethlehem. Why she decided to stay with her mother-in-law. What it was like to go gleaning in the fields behind the reapers. What happened when Boaz took notice of her and offered her a place amongst his workers.

Making life easier for her, being hospitable and generous in his attitude to her. We don't know if there were stirrings in her heart, or if those had well and truly died after the passing of her first husband. If what follows was all Naomi's doing, or if Ruth had some reason to believe crawling under Boaz's blanket would meet with kindness and more generosity of spirit.

Bible stories are very economical when it comes to telling us about the emotions and motivations of its characters, and Ruth's story even more so than many others. And there is a reason for that. It keeps the story open for us, its readers, to read our own, or the story of someone we know into it. To read them not as the story of Ruth the Moabitess who may or may not have lived three thousand years ago, but to read them as the story of any woman who finds herself in difficulty, losing loved ones, moving countries, being at the mercy of some man or other, looking for work, for security, for friendship, for support.

Taking risks and making decisions on the way that may or may not bring fulfillment and happiness.

It is no coincidence that here, in chapter three, right in the middle of the story the author plays around with the letters of Ruth's name, in the Hebrew (and unfortunately this has all been neatly translated away in the English we are reading). Interweaving the Hebrew words for friendship, faithfulness, decision, decision making, fulfillment and happiness in and out of the story. Telling us that this is really what this part, and perhaps even the whole story is about: relationships, loyalty, faithfulness, risk taking and decision making, and fulfillment as a result of it.

We also, suddenly, see Naomi come to life in this chapter. So far Ruth has been the active one, the one who offered friendship, loyalty and faithfulness, taking risks and making decisions. What we have heard from Naomi are sighs, and complaints, and despair about her situation. Call me Mara, bitterness, instead of the lovely one she says at the beginning of chapter two. Because my life has lost all its luster and I don't expect that to change any time soon.....

But now, suddenly, she is the one who takes the initiative. The harvest is nearly over. Grim times lie, once more, ahead. Something needs to happen.

And this bitter old woman shows she can be cunning. That she is not going to give up without a fight after all.

Go, tart yourself up and crawl under his blanket. You never know, he may do something for us, this nice guy who has welcomed you so kindly onto his field.

There are a couple of things we need to understand about this part of the story. First of all, playing

in the background, are the laws we read from Leviticus and Deuteronomy today, as well as the words of Boaz earlier on, echoing the words of the psalms and the story of Abraham. Under the law Naomi can appeal to Boaz to help her regain her rights as a mother in Israel, re-acquire the land she and her husband sold when they left and make sure she has offspring. Ruth, comes looking for shelter under the wings of the God of Israel as a foreigner and he who lives according to the law is compelled to give her that.

However, Ruth is a Moabite. Which means all the rights she may have as a foreigner, or may have gained marrying an Israelite as a foreign woman are null and void because of what her people did to Israel when they were traveling through the desert. And worse than that: Moabite women, probably because of their desperate status, were known to prostitute themselves. And they were regarded cheap and easy prey for men who were looking for some fun.

And then perhaps add to that: on the threshing floor, at the end of the harvest, there was a lot of drinking and celebrating going on and it is highly likely Boaz not only slept on the threshing floor to protect his harvest, it is well possible he may have had trouble getting home that night.

When Ruth, in her best dress, with the aromatic fragrance of oils wafting around her, decides to crawl under Boaz's blanket. Boaz can take this in a variety of ways.

An offer from a prostitute Moabite.

An offer of thanks from a Moabite, who are known to be free with their sexual favours.

An offer and a plea to Boaz to take up his duties towards Naomi under the law by taking Ruth as his wife. In other words: a very bold and very desperate offer for marriage.

Under the cover of darkness in the aftermath of a wild party to celebrate the harvest anything could have happened. And nobody would have blamed Boaz if he had taken Ruth's bold move differently from the way he does. And perhaps even Boaz sleeping with Ruth and taking her as an offer of thanks for his favour on the field was the only thing Naomi was bargaining for in the first place anyway. Once he'd slept with her, she may have reasoned, Ruth might get pregnant, and then Boaz might feel obliged to her, or at least to her offspring.

It is all possible. But the story doesn't tell us what is going on in the hearts and minds of Naomi, Ruth and Boaz. Only that Naomi comes up with this plan that Ruth goes along with it and that Boaz proves to be a righteous man. Righteous in the sense of someone who lives according to the law, but takes following it further in love and respect than he has to.

He has taken this Moabite woman under his wing, covered her with grace, and even in the night, when nobody is watching, he respects her and cares for her in a way that even the law does not expect from him.

We'll see next time how this story continues. For now we may want to take a good look at ourselves and see where we fit in this story as it has been developing so far, where it touches us, where we recognise ourselves, where it mirrors our own situation.

Perhaps you have come, like Ruth, from another country and know what it is like to adapt and adjust to a life somewhere else. You may even have come as a refugee, either from hardship or violence. Maybe you've made some bold moves in your life, made some scary decisions that could have gotten you into trouble. Perhaps loyalty and friendship have taken you places where you never expected to end up before hand. Perhaps you know what it is like to lose the love of your life early

on, lose your dreams and your hopes and find them rekindled later on. Perhaps your life has played itself out around the Hebrew words the letters of Ruth's name can form: friendship, loyalty, decision making, risk taking and fulfillment.

Perhaps you recognise yourself in the sighs of Naomi, because too much has happened in your life that has been sad and difficult. Perhaps you feel tired, like her, past dreams and ideals, because life has taken them away from you. Perhaps you recognise yourself in the cunning, tough old woman who will fight for survival even if it means sacrificing her daughter-in-law's virtue on the altar of future security. Perhaps you feel there has been more bitterness than loveliness in your life, and perhaps you have stopped expecting anything other or better.

Or perhaps Boaz speaks to you. Perhaps you'd like to be like him, someone who gives more than is expected, who is generous and just, who walks the way of the Lord and knows how to do the right thing and when. Who will, even under the cover of darkness remain a person of integrity and righteousness. Perhaps you long for an opportunity to be, like him the wings of God the psalm talks about for others, where they will find cover and care.

Perhaps all three speak to you, touching on various aspects of your personal history and development.

What the story asks of you is for you to think. To consider how friendship and loyalty, the decisions you make, the risks you take, the generosity you show, the way you let the law guide you, affect your life and that of others.

Amen.