

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 7 NOVEMBER 2010

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

Ruth 4: 1-12; Deuteronomy 30: 11-20; Psalm 63; Matthew 5: 1-9 1:6-11

"A Good Choice"

The image at the front of the order of service offers us a wonderful visual version of the passage from Ruth we have read today. Boaz's place is central, right bang in the middle of everything, with the other redeemer placed slightly lower in front of him. Ruth is standing to the side, behind a pillar, and the elders of the city look on, their faces showing the gravity of the issue at hand. To the left there is an older woman and a young boy, who conjure up a future that may or may not be about to take shape. It poses a question: Will Naomi ever come to the gate with her grandson by her side to watch the men of the city go about their business? The dog at Ruth's feet and her showing one bare foot indicates, according to the artistic conventions of the time, that she is about to be married. Her dress billows around her middle and makes us wonder if after the abundant harvest the fields of Bethlehem are soon about to bear even more and better fruit. The shoe that's being handed over to Boaz suggests the deal is nearly done, the way the feet of her closest kinsmen light up emphasising in yet another way that he has let go of his right to redeem both Naomi and Ruth. His hands speak volumes: "I cannot redeem without damaging my inheritance..." as Boaz looks on and gestures back "if you want her, you can have her, but if you don't, I am happy to take over from you at this point..."

We see something happen that is disconcerting, when considered against the background of what has gone before. All initiative and power is stripped away from the proactive, strong, self-sufficient and independent Ruth and her resilient, tough and rather cunning mother-in-law at this point. Where thus far the story has been mainly a story of women, here, suddenly, the men take over and both Ruth and Naomi lose their voice. I don't know how many of you have experience with others taking over and shutting you up and out of what really is your life and your business, but I can tell you it is infuriating, disempowering and humiliating. Especially when it is supported by law, custom and culture everybody else thinks completely justifies and legitimises it happening.

It probably happens more to women than to men, more to people who don't have the means or wealth to assert themselves, more to the vulnerable in society than the strong. But most if not all of us will recognise the feeling, even if we have never really been in a place where our whole life and future was in the balance in the way Ruth's and Naomi's are in this story.

Of course Boaz remains the good and faithfully righteous executer of the law who looks after Ruth and her mother-in-law, but at the same time, when we come to this part of the story, he seems to slip into his role of wealthy potentate a bit too easily.

Everything in the text indicates he is very comfortable here. After the discovery on the threshing floor where he stutters his way through, here his Hebrew suddenly becomes fluid and full of flourish. After the confrontation with Ruth's sudden and disconcerting initiative under the cover of darkness, here, in the light of a new day, Boaz is in his element as the powerful pillar of society he undoubtedly was. If there was any suggestion of romantic involvement before, this is now firmly pushed aside by the formality of Boaz's dealings with the first redeemer. If there was any love and admiration for this foreign woman who worked so hard and has looked after her mother-in-law so well, this disappears under legal proceedings and property interests. It's a man's world of power and business we've entered into here, no doubt about it.

What happens is hard to reconcile with any of the laws we know from Deuteronomy or Leviticus. Boaz seems to argue with a weird mixture of law and information we haven't been told about previously, neither of which seems to be accurate or correct.

We've never heard of Naomi still owning land in Bethlehem for instance. Is he making this up on the spot to catch the interest of the redeemer? If anybody he should marry Naomi to fulfill the law, she has the right to redemption before Ruth. Ruth, because she is a Moabite is not even part of the package as far as the laws we know from our scriptures today are concerned. The whole passage is, in that respect, riddled with interpretative question marks. Nothing adds up, except that somehow, at the end of it, Boaz wins the right to redeem the land and emerges with Ruth at his side.

Mister So and So, or Mister Good, if we call him by his Hebrew names, is a nobody who walks into the story as casually as he walks out again. The future of two women nevertheless hinges on whatever he decides to do or not do. He happens to make the choice that is best for his and his family's short term interests. "I can't redeem, it would damage my inheritance" opening the way for Boaz to take over his role. Mr Good disappears from the story, where Boaz, who is prepared to take on the well being of a widow and an alien, becomes part of the future in a big way. Great grandfather to King David and great great great grandfather to the Messiah.

There is a catch though.

The book of Ruth was written just after the Israelites return from exile. The literature that comes out at the time is full of zeal for purity of both race and religion. The people of Israel felt they'd been given a second chance and they were determined to make the right choices this time and follow the commandments and keep themselves as far as they possibly could from idolaters. Foreigners were seen as people who needed to be avoided at all cost. Moabites even more so. Weren't they born from the incestuous union Lot's daughters initiated after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah? Hadn't they refused to provide the people of God with hospitality in the desert? And weren't all their women prostitutes?

At the time this small novella is written, the people of Israel were into rewriting their history, revisiting and highlighting their heritage, proud of the glory days of David and Solomon, emphasising their ancient rights to the land and their interminable commitment to their God.

For a story teller to get the great great grandfather of David not only involved with a Moabitess, but actually marrying her, and having children by her was about as countercultural as it could get!

Unthinkable! Moving a Moabitess into the lineage of King David at a time like that was revolutionary, to say the least.

The call to show generosity and do justice even to your arch enemies rattling at the certainties of keeping the boundaries of race and culture clear and untainted. The great king himself was tainted!

Time and time again we find this back and forth of culture and counter culture in scripture. Questioning especially those circumstances and situations where the poor suffer, and the powerless find themselves without a voice. Emphasising again and again that the poor, the broken, the powerless and the victims of injustice and violence are God's prime concern. Long before Jesus appears on the scene, giving shape to that concern in his life in a way that had never been seen before. Showing that God's laws, God's generosity, God's love, God's justice, God's peace, can never be limited to those who are in, even where history and prejudice and good solid sense of self

preservation tell us otherwise.

Mr So and So doesn't make it into the history books of God's Kingdom. His family's inheritance is long gone, in spite of his careful guarding of it. Boaz does enter the history books. But even though he is the man who saves the day through the use of his power and influence, it is Ruth who remains the central character of the story. Poor, powerless, dependent on others to decide her future, she is the one who, in the end, produces fulfillment, both for Naomi and Boaz. Without her there would be no child, no Obed, no King David and no Messiah. And that is perhaps the greatest irony of this story that is so full of humor and irony all the way through. Even when the powerful slip into their roles and push the powerless aside, nothing can really happen without those whom they deny a place in the negotiations that are taking place.

In Ruth's story we recognise the story of many women who have, over the ages, used their ingenuity and creativity to cope with life and fight for their future. But this story is not only a story for feminists. Migrant workers, refugees, immigrants, those who struggle for survival every day, are at the mercy of those who make the decisions at the gate of the city about who has access to their bread and the wellbeing they can provide for their community. Forced to wait and watch until their future is decided by others. Rights given and taken away again without notice or explanation. Not only in places far away, but here in Australia and Melbourne.

Ruth is in town and she waits at the gate of our city wondering what we will do while she fights for survival. If we will follow the law generously or if we will be too worried about our "inheritance" to redeem her.

Amen.