

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

CHRIST THE KING

SUNDAY 21 NOVEMBER 2010

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

Ruth 4: 12 - 22; Psalm 126; Matthew 1: 1-17

"Getting to know God's Messiah"

After immersing ourselves in the book of Ruth for a couple of weeks, today we come to the final chapter in the series. Time to look back and reflect on what we have discovered and how the different threads of the story as they have presented themselves to us, now come together in the final verses of the book.

First, after the proceedings at the gate have been concluded, the prominence of women is reasserted. The women of Bethlehem who give Boaz their best wishes at the wedding, refer to the two earth mothers, Rachel and Lea. Not, as might have been expected to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Women are, by them, identified as the ones building the house of Israel. The men can take charge as much as they want, but in the end, when it comes to building the people of God, it's women, and not men who determine the course of history.

Then the well-wishing of the women takes another unexpected turn: They say: "May your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah".

For those of you who are not familiar with it, it is MA rated material,, one of the juicier morsels of biblical story telling: Judah, Jacob's eldest, tries to get out of honouring the levirate laws and find a husband for his daughter-in-law Tamar, whose husband has died. Tamar, in desperation, decides to seduce Judah to procure a son. She dresses up like a prostitute, Judah falls for the ploy, and when he calls his daughter-in-law to account over her unexpected pregnancy, she turns up in the clothes he immediately recognises as the clothes of the woman he himself has slept with.

So it is a bit doubtful to say the least, to wish Boaz to be like the house of Perez, the son of Tamar and Judah!

But why? Why this reference here? There is some logic in bringing back women into focus after the men in the city gate and their dealings with the legal issues around the redemption of Ruth and Naomi seem to be taking over the story. But why bring this particular, rather painful part, of Israel's heritage up at this point?

This reference tells us some of what this book is really about: The adherence to the levirate laws in Israel, the care for the widow and the orphan, the protection of the family name and heritage, and the insurance that every family has a part in Israel's heritage and future.

Ruth, it is argued, was written to support these laws because they were not implemented conscientiously enough at the time the book was written. It endeavors to assure that the living and the wealthy don't forget they have an obligation to look after poorer relations, especially after a death in the family.

At the time, not to have offspring or land meant being cut off from God's future and God's promises and it was the duty of all Israelites to make sure that could not happen to anyone. The levirate laws

made sure it couldn't. And as long as everyone adhered to them, every person and every family was sure to remain part of the future as much as was humanly possible. Unfortunately, as far as we know, this never worked. In all of the long history of Israel, these laws were only scantily put into practice and were often avoided and ignored. Personal gain and short term concern about the future of one's own family often undermined the justice and care for the poor that these laws advocated. A book like Ruth could have been written at any time during that long history, in an attempt to reinvigorate and promote the values these laws stand for.

Is that all there is to it though? Is this, in the end, a book that promotes ancient and archaic laws that are no longer valid or practiced in our society, part of a system of beliefs we no longer adhere to? Offspring and land may still play a role in Jewish faith and culture, but in Christian beliefs it doesn't figure at all. In our culture and society these things have long since been spiritualised and individualised. Sure, we feel it is important to look after the widow and the orphan, but we no longer see this as something that is necessary to secure their future with God in the middle of God's people. The moral imperative is limited to providing them with what they need in the here and now and is no longer connected to how their family may or may not be able to be part of God's future, or with the just distribution of wealth and resources.

Archaic? Maybe. But it is worth reflecting on what this means for us, as people of the twenty-first century. More and more our field of vision has narrowed itself down to the individual, to the here and now. Often with detrimental consequences. Who cares about the future? About our children and grandchildren, and further still our great grandchildren and great, great grandchildren? Who cares about the land, the division of wealth, the accumulation of personal property at the cost of others? Somewhere in our history there is a dream where every man, woman and child is looked after, where property and wealth get redistributed every so many years, where nobody goes hungry and everybody has the opportunity to start afresh after illness or misfortune have wreaked havoc with their life.

Somewhere in our history there is a dream tugging at our hearts, that tells us that there is more than just the here and now, just personal gain and individual interest, the forces of capital and power. That there should be a place for the widow and the orphan, to live, to work and to thrive. That there should be a place where fortunes are realigned, not by accident or divine providence, but by the dutiful and faithful implementation of laws that promote justice and care and insure a future for every one, no matter how hard they may be hit by misfortune on the way.

Ruth brings that message home in a beautiful, colourful and convincing story that compels anyone who is in a position to redeem, will redeem. To give up personal gain and inheritance and generously make justice available to the less fortunate, even if they are foreigners, aliens, outsiders, enemies. Even to Moabites.

We may want to think about how this relates to the plight of refugees, asylum seekers, of migrant workers, of desperate people anywhere in the world who are somehow trying to procure a better future for themselves and their families. To the people of our world who are stuck in poverty and hopelessness while a relatively small group thrives and throws up their hands like Mr. So and So in the story: I can't help it, I have to look after my own, you understand?

I know, it is uncomfortable to face these issues. They are overwhelming, difficult, complicated, and seem impossible to solve. It's too much and too big, world poverty, world injustice, creating a world of peace and abundance for everyone. Where does one start?

Well, perhaps one could start with Boaz. Honouring this archaic law and making sure we do what we

can, where we are, when the opportunity arises, and make ourselves and our resources available without hesitation and concern about our own heritage, our own short term interests. What the book of Ruth tells us, if we are on Boaz's side of the fence, and most of us probably are, is that we begin with doing justice and being generous about it. No more, and no less.

We would not do the book justice however if we thought it finished there. As we have discovered over the last couple of weeks there is more hidden in the folds of the beautiful tapestry that is woven together from the many different and colourful strands and threads this story consists of.

There is Ruth, hard hit by fate, an integrated, faithful woman, determined and creative in the way she deals with the hardships life throws at her. Her name means "friend", and she is a true friend, a faithful companion, to Naomi, her mother-in-law. Not because she is duty bound, but because she chooses to stay, even where logic and good common sense suggested a different course of action.

Then there is Ruth the Moabitess. The arch-enemy coming to the fields of Bethlehem, the house of bread, asking for a justice that extends beyond duty and obedience to the letter of the law. The alien entering the sacred bloodlines of God's chosen and adding to them her strength and resilience.

There is Naomi, whose hopes for a positive future for her and her family are dashed when she loses, one by one, those who she depended on for it. Husband and sons dead, she finds herself abroad in a place that has no social support network in place to care for such as she is: the stranger, the widow, the orphan. She returns to her place of origin as Mara, bitterness. Disillusioned, disempowered, voiceless. Charity her only option. She however, finds justice and generosity instead, a new future opens up, she is to be part of the future and of God's promises after all. She will not die empty, but she will live on, fulfilled and happy. Loveliness returns because of the law, because of the faithfulness and friendship of an alien woman, because of God giving her another son to suckle; through Ruth, her daughter-in-law, who proves to be worth more than seven sons.

There is of course the feminist angle which makes this a very subversive book in what was, and often still is, a very patriarchal world. It's the women who have the initiative in the story. They are the ones who build Israel, they are the ones who, with creativity, cunning and hard work, bring the future to bear on the present. They name the future (an uncommon thing to happen in that time, usually this task would have fallen to the men). They are the ones who involve God and whom God is involved with, their friendship, their faithfulness, their fulfillment, their ability to give life that steers the story and gives it meaning. Their strength and their resilience is what matters most, the men and their dealings in the gate an aside, Boaz no more than a good and faithful servant at best.

And then there is the house of bread, playfully woven in, surfacing every now and again to remind us that this story is not about some abstract moral or legal issue. It is about food, about future, about justice taking shape, about redemption happening and saving real people in situations of real need. God's house of bread is not a symbolic abstraction. It is rooted in the reality of feeding all who seek cover in its gates. Sharing the abundance of God's table, be it in ancient Bethlehem or here at St. Aidan's Uniting Church, is not about the conducting of some precious, revered, archaic ritual, it is about reality, about real food and real people receiving of the abundance God makes available.

And last but not least. In the final verses the house of Perez appears once more. Just to remind us what stock Boaz hails from - in case we forget. The great King David is the great grandson of a man with a couple of shady characters and doubtful incidents colouring his families' past. He may be the picture of righteousness and generosity in this story, but even he is not free of blemish. It's not only the reference to his great great grandfather that cuts Boaz down to size though. The text clearly and explicitly states that it is not him having sex with Ruth that brings Obed about, but HIM with capital

letters who makes Ruth conceive and the future open up. (Can you hear the flutter of the angel Gabriel's wings in the distance? The Xmas bells ringing?) It's not Boaz's prowess or strength, or his untainted lineage that are at the root of King David's parentage. It is a Moabite woman and a God who turns every assumption about what is right and proper upside down the moment you think you had it figured out (Can you hear Mary sing her magnificat?)

And it gets worse. When Matthew writes his "life of Christ" he gives him a pedigree that is swarming with dubious characters, headstrong women, aliens, archenemies, liars, cheats and every other sort of sinner under the sun. The Messiah hails from stock most of us would be too embarrassed to mention when boasting about our own pedigree.

God's King is conceived, from the start, into the flesh and bones of our world. No human condition, plight, temptation or position is alien to him. It is all there, even before he is born. Refugees, prostitutes, the helpless, the hopeless, the voiceless, the trampled and suppressed, as well as the mighty, the powerful, the righteous and the strong. Rachel, Leah, Jacob, Rahab, Judah, Tamar, Perez, Naomi, Ruth, Boaz, Obed, David, Bathseba, Solomon. They are all there, and in them the seeds of God's future coming to take shape amongst us grow. Asking us to join and be part of that movement, fragile, fallible sinners though we may be and do the best we can to bring God's Kingdom to life in our midst. Amen.