

# The Book of Ruth – God’s providence

St James Evensong Sermon by the Rev Derek Lightbourne, April 8 2018

Keynote Bible passage: Ruth Chapter 2

A few weeks back I watched a repeat of the one of the trilogy of Lord of the Rings. This time viewing it all seemed to progress from battle to battle. Great scenes for filming. There’s similarities in the early part of the destiny of the Hebrew after they left Egypt, spending 40 years in the Wilderness and eventually arriving in the ‘Promised Land’. ‘Promised’ it may have been but instead of peaceful existence they encountered a torrid time. Existing tribes made it clear they were not wanted. Thus, the books of Joshua and Judges dating round 1200BC diary the trials and tribulations and feature warrior leaders like Samson and Joshua.

Then as a significant contrast in the Hebrew Bible comes a short book, an account of tenderness and mercy, set in a peaceful countryside. The story of Ruth is about a poor, widowed foreigner who becomes the wife of a respected man from Bethlehem and gives birth to one who will have a role in God’s plan unfolding.

Last month’s sermon on the Book of Ruth was very much introductory, of Naomi and her daughter in law Ruth. Tonight, we focus on Ruth’s meeting Boaz. Inevitably there is some overlap from last month.

The theme of the Sermon is threefold, under the overall heading ‘Context.’ First there’s historical context, then relational context and thirdly faith context. In some respects also we can see parallels in today’s context.

## *1) Historical and geographical context*

Some thousand years before Christ, the country we know as the Holy Land was inhabited by tribal peoples and the one’s we encounter in this story are from Moab. The land which was Moab lies to the east of the Dead Sea. The story takes place near Bethlehem on the west side of the Dead Sea, in modern day Israel. The land was farmed for barley and it is into this scene we meet Ruth and Boaz. The story would suggest this is about peasants, hard-working and contented, peaceful and where crops are sown and harvested.

Because of a famine, Elimelech and Naomi and their children move to the land of Moab. Their two boys marry Moabite women, one of whom is Ruth. The sons die and Ruth is on her own with mother in law Naomi. Eventually the two move back to Naomi’s land in Judah near Bethlehem. (That was chapter one).

## *2) Relational context*

Tonight’s selected reading introduces Boaz, ‘a prominent rich man’ (2.1) and farmer and landowner. Ruth wants to get work, as a widow would really suffer when alone, and also be at the mercy of men who would want to take advantage of her plight. Boaz meets Ruth and asks where she is from. Ruth asks to work in the fields, and Boaz is kind and caring, allowing her request and ensuring she is protected from the men workers.). Hence Boaz’ concern is to protect Ruth from abuse by the young men. (The Hebrew word translates shame or abuse) ‘I ordered the young men not to bother her’, this being a euphemism.

Note in those days the status of women rated quite low and especially foreign women. The main role of women in those days was to give birth, especially to have sons. That expectation of childbirth is voiced, as after the meeting Naomi says to Ruth 'I must find a husband for you, so that you will have a home of your own.'(3.1)

Boaz who's older takes a liking for the younger Ruth and they eat together. The symbolism of this is accepting a stranger into the family. Ruth tells her mother about this meeting with Boaz and what occurred. Naomi is 'match-making' with encouraging the relationship saying Boaz is related to her through family. All is good as by this Ruth gets some of the grain to take to Naomi. And more, Naomi sees a future for this relationship and praises God for one who will be a 'redeemer', that is, one who will safeguard property rights through marriage. Thus Boaz, a kinsman of Naomi eventually marries Ruth (and that's Chapters 3 and 4). Thus, racial issues lie behind this action.

Racial issues were a concern to Jesus and in his earthly ministry and he set a practical example with his ministering to the Samaritan woman at the well and to the Syro-Phoenician woman because of her sick daughter. Jesus likewise ministered to the widow of Nain – a similar circumstance to Naomi's situation on the death of her husband. In resurrection context the cross was to be a unifying factor. St Paul wrote to the non-Jew Gentile believers 'In Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. The desire of Christ Paul wrote was 'that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace; in his flesh; in his flesh he made both groups into one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility between us.' Countries who build walls fly in the face of the purposes and teaching of God. Racism has no place in the contemporary world. The example of Boaz and Naomi and Ruth is an early instance in Scripture telling of the purpose and desire of God.

### 3) *Faith context*

The story has a faith-context and hence was included in the Hebrew Scriptures. Boaz sees God's providence in what happened for Ruth. He prays with thanksgiving, of Ruth and of her kindly actions towards her mother in law. 'May the Lord reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge.' (2.20). Boaz regards himself as an enabler under God.

I've entitled this Sermon, *The Book of Ruth, God's providence*. This is especially for Naomi in her grief. She despairs to God: 'Don't call me Naomi, call me Mara, because Almighty God has made my life bitter. When I left here I had plenty but the Lord has brought me back without a thing'. But all is not doom and gloom, in Ruth's decision choosing to stay with her mother God provides a way through. God's providence unfolds. Provide-ence then for Naomi, for Ruth and for Boaz.

Do we see God's provide-ence today? When things come together some call them 'co-incidences' but one might also recognise them as being 'God-incidences.' Let me share one I consider from our own context of the parish, with the availability of Chris Low coming from the UK to the Hutt and willing to share in ministry, especially after the gap with Jean's departure. This began some years ago, my having first met Chris at an Order of St Luke Conference in Canada and then being involved pastorally in her NZ family.) For me it is an affirmation that as we seek to be in God's will and purpose unfolding we are reminded of the words in Ephesians 2: 'In union with Christ Jesus God has created for us a life of good deeds, which he

has already prepared for us to do.' A Prayer of the 1662 Communion also expresses this: 'That we may continue in God's holy fellowship and do all such good works as you have prepared for us to walk in.'

Returning again to the faith-context theme in the Book of Ruth there is the profoundly significant expression of God's providence.

For a moment then may I give a Preview in what to look forward to. The meeting and subsequent union of Ruth and Boaz was a significant event not only for the two main characters but also for the nation and eventually the world. As God's providence in history unfolds, the son of Ruth and Boaz was named Obed, and Obed was the father of Jesse who was the father of the great king David.

Interestingly here also is faith and relational context as the son of Boaz and Ruth, in Israelite law is also regarded as the heir of Naomi and her dead husband. King David then, who in Hebrew eyes was next to Moses in honour was the grandson of a man whose mother was a Gentile. Naomi is given insight in seeing God's moving through events occurring as she prays 'Blessed be he (Boaz) by the Lord, the Lord keeps his promises to the living and the dead.'

In closing then, this delightful story occurs in Scripture after the travail of 40 years in the wilderness, and the turbulence of Joshua and Judges. Here is an assurance of the reward of God's blessing for ones who are obedient and walk in his ways. Here God's providence unfolds.