

# The Goodness of God

Sermon at Evensong by the Rev Derek Lightbourne St James May 13<sup>th</sup> 2018

Bible passage: Book of Ruth Chapter 3.1 – 18

Background) In the Holy Scriptures we find a delightful story, in a pastoral setting, where a love relationship flourishes. This is in the Book of Ruth. As a background for those of you who missed last 'episode', the story opens with our being told of a famine in Palestine and Elimelech and his wife Naomi move to the land of Moab and settle there. They have two sons who each marry Moabite women, one of whom is Ruth. Elimelech dies as also do the two sons. Some time later the family hears that there's been a harvest in Judah. This is believed to have been God's providence. Thus, Naomi determines to move back to her home country. One daughter remains in Moab and Ruth decides to go with Naomi, her mother in law. Their relationship is very close and we hear Ruth's words sometimes heard at a wedding service ('Where you go I will go, where you lodge I will lodge, your people shall be my people and your God my God, where you die I will die, there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you.')

So Naomi and Ruth move back to their ancestral land near Bethlehem. Naomi is still grieving but then into the scene comes Boaz, a kindly farmer and landowner. He provides work for Ruth in the fields and ensures she is protected from the young males also out working. As the story unfolds Boaz takes a fancy for this young Moabite woman and shares his favours as they eat together. Naomi notes what is happening and senses possibilities in this budding relationship. So from her bitterness Naomi comes to appreciate God's providence, for Ruth and for herself. Even more so, Naomi is very aware of family relationships, being a positive as the custom for one who has died is that the widow would be expected to marry another member of the husband's family. Last month's Evensong sermon was this last part and all is set up for ...you know what.

One bible commentary entitles Chapter 3 as '*Seduction*'. Another heads it as 'At the threshing floor.' I imagine it as being a shed with a haystack. Naomi has noted this is where Boaz sleeps the night while in the fields, and sets up Ruth to go to him after Boaz has had a big meal including wine as well as food. The text says 'he was in a contented mood'. The story teller continues: 'During the night Boaz woke up suddenly, turned over and was surprised to find a woman 'at his feet'. This may be a euphemism for the intimacy which occurred as Naomi has said 'to lift the covers...' Thus Boaz is aware of a woman beside him and asks 'who are you'. Ruth reveals herself and asks Boaz to marry her. Early morning dawns (the time 'before one person can recognise another ') and Ruth surreptitiously leaves, taking some grain for food and goes home to Naomi. She asks Ruth, 'How did you get on?'. This sets us up for the next chapter, next month.

1) As well as the story we hear, there is also an important underlying significance of the meeting taking place. This has to do with *family relationships* for as we have heard are important to Naomi, and Boaz is also mindful, and then Ruth. Note that in proposing marriage Ruth has said to Boaz – 'because you are a close relative, you are responsible for taking care of me.' This is good reason and she requests to marry Boaz. Earlier there has been one of those 'God-incidences' translated in the passage as 'as it happened' – that Boaz was of the family of Elimelech and Naomi and Ruth had come to the land owned by Boaz. Hence

Naomi had realised the potential relationship with one who was a 'kinsman'. He would become a 'redeemer' thus recognising the relationship and restoring it to rights.

The story continues - Ruth is kind to Boaz (that's a euphemism) and Boaz returns the favour as the latter accepts the events of that night, and counsels Ruth not to be afraid. But Boaz notes that there is another who is closer in family connections (thus being redeemer) to Ruth and he would check it out. This person says to Boaz, 'Acquire it for yourself,' and Boaz is thus free to marry Ruth. As part of the deal Elimelech's land would be bought by Boaz and thus stay in the family. Thus Boaz becomes '*kinsman-redeemer*.'

2) Christian writers when reflecting on these actions see in them parallels with *Jesus Christ as kinsman-redeemer* to all believers.

Just as Boaz has been generous in his dealings with Ruth and Naomi so also God has been generous in providing Jesus to be redeemer for us in relationship to God. Thus enabling believers to be in relationship with God 'through Jesus Christ.' Furthermore the payment (as would be for property) is not in money but in the life of Jesus who died and now lives for us. It's that sense of identification we might feel in times of distress as St Paul write to the Corinthians - Blessed be God the god of all consolation, who consoles us in our afflictions so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation in which we ourselves are consoled by God. '(1.3 - 5). That is a real closeness in relationship - the actions of a kinsman redeemer.

Peter in his first letter also highlights this insight: 'You know what was paid to set you free from the worthless manner of life handed down by our ancestors. It was not something that can be destroyed, such as silver or gold, it was the costly sacrifice of Christ...he had been chosen by God before the creation of the world and was revealed in these last days for our sake. Through him you believe in God, who raised him from death and gave him glory; and so your faith and hope are fixed on God.' (1 Peter 1. 18 - 19).

Thus in our hymnody we can raise our voices and sing: 'There is a Redeemer, Jesus, God's own Son' and "Guide me O thou great Redeemer'. I've left till the very end to tell you the title of the Sermon: *The Goodness of God*.' This is what we have seen in the delightful story of Naomi, Ruth and Boaz as the actions and provide-ence of God is seen 'as it happened'. As we consider the bigger picture we also become very aware of God's goodness extended to humanity in relationship through Jesus the Christ, 'risen, ascended, glorified.

3) Thirdly and finally as we consider the significance of this theme are words of our communion liturgy from the NZ Prayer Book. Let me share it: '*Redeemer God, rich in mercy, infinite in goodness, we were far off until you brought us near and our hands are empty until you fill them.*' Here is described the unconditional goodness of God towards us believers. 'Rich in mercy' recalls the insight of Peter. 'Infinite in goodness' reminds us of the boundless extent of the love of God - 'God who so loved the world that he gave his only Son.....' The prayer continues that we may be brought to God's everlasting kingdom this by the goodness of God. 'O the depths and riches of your wisdom O God' how unsearchable are your judgments and untraceable your ways.' For us then, meaning and understanding may not at first be obvious, and comes realisation of God's goodness in the situation.