

Ruth: a story for today

(1) Setting the scene

Readings: Isaiah 56:1-8; Acts 10:34f (cf Deuteronomy 23:3, Ezra 9-10)

There are many good books that help us understand the book of Ruth from what we might call a traditional Christian viewpoint. We could go down that route in this short series, but I would like to take a path less travelled and try to see this story from the point of view of the first readers. I'm not going to turn my back on a Christ-centred interpretation, but I want us to get a feel for how those first readers heard this story so that we may then be better able to understand the unfolding story of God's redeeming, recreating grace at work in history, and ultimately revealed in Christ.

The story of Ruth is a bright spot on the otherwise grey scene. It is, of course, a love story but it is set against a bleak background. The story takes place in the time of the Judges, that period of Israel's history between the days of Moses and Joshua at one end and Saul and David at the other. Despite the great Sunday School heroes like Gideon, Samson and Deborah, the period of the Judges was not a happy one.

During those years Israel became fragmented, descending into virtual anarchy until the days of the last and greatest Judge, Samuel, and the coming of the Kings, especially David and Solomon. Ruth's story takes place towards the end of this period. It starts during a time of both political unrest and natural disaster. It was a time when people asked, as Naomi does in the story, "Where is God?" People looked at their world and wondered about the stories of Moses and the escape from Egypt, about crossing the Sea of Reeds, about the Pillar of Cloud and Fire, about Manna. They spoke of Joshua and the great battles, when enemies were crushed, and everyone lived in fear of Israel and her God. Now they hid in caves and winnowed wheat in secret places out of sight of those same enemies. They must have asked themselves if these stories were true. Did they really happen, or was it all make-believe? Had God really promised to provide and protect? There wasn't much evidence of it in their daily experience. Even the Judges could not stop the downward slide.

But the *written* account we have in this book does not come from this time. The story of Ruth and Boaz was told and retold until it was written down in its current form by an unknown author/editor either just before Babylon destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple or, more probably, just after the return of the exiles in the days of Cyrus the Persian, that is 400-450 years after the original events.

This date is important because it gives us an insight as to how the storyteller wants us to view this story. So, let's go back to that time when the remnant of the Jewish nation was returning to their homeland. It's difficult to imagine the shockwaves that went through Jewish thought and belief following the fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Temple and the forced deportation of many of the people into strange lands. It must have seemed that all of God's promises had come to nothing. The book of Lamentations takes us into the broken heart of the people and some of the Psalms make

difficult reading as the psalmists address their despair, fear and anger. Psalm 137 contains some of the most difficult words in Scripture, enough to turn some away from the Bible altogether.

Some voices were raised to try to hold the people together, particularly Ezekiel and Jeremiah, and eventually a new king came to the throne and the people could return home. When they arrived back in their land they found things were very different. The land was desolate, the cities in ruins. Those people who had not been forced into exile had intermarried with others exiled from different parts of the old Babylonian empire: a despised mixed race who came to be known as the Samaritans. Isaiah of the Exile spoke words of comfort and hope, telling the people that God had not finished with his people. Others brought harsher words. Many believed that their ancestors had been ejected from the land because they had not kept God's law (which was true) and that they needed to be far more law-abiding if they were not to suffer a worse fate.

Now imagine you are in Jerusalem in about 444BC. Ezra the priest has let it be known that as a sign of commitment to God, all non-Jewish wives and dependents are to be sent back to their place of origin. A great fervent crowd has gathered, even though it's pouring with rain. As you begin to be swept along by the zeal of the masses someone places a small scroll in your hand and says, "Read this!"

The scroll handed to you is the story of Ruth, the Moabite great-grandmother of no less than King David. Just about every aspect of Ruth disqualifies from every social norm of her day, and this new post-exilic fervour. She is not just a foreigner and a woman, she is a widow. About the only thing she has going for her is that she is not a leper!

The book of Ruth addresses several questions in story form, just as Jesus addressed such issues through parables. The central issue of this story is Naomi's emptiness and the main themes are the providence of God and what it means to live righteously. I would suggest that these are still major concerns both inside and outside the church.

But Ruth is not an easy story. The ideas expressed in these four chapters are radical, even subversive. As such Ruth stands alongside the prophets Isaiah and Micah who challenged the common understanding of what it means to live as people of God.

The story of Ruth is a reminder to all who would follow God that there is more to righteousness than simply obeying the law. As Jesus says, 'Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.' (Matthew 5:20). If we are to look at this story through Christian eyes (and it is right that we should) we will see these 'subversive words' reflected in the life of Jesus: he touches the leper, though this is forbidden by the law, he meets and eats with known sinners though this is an affront to the legally righteous, he ignores, and allows his disciples to ignore the Sabbath rules, he reverses the accepted norms and opens the doors to anyone. In the story of Ruth, God restores the wanderer, fills the empty, blesses the outsider and honours the lawbreakers.

Amen

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Sunday 21 June 2020