

Ruth: a story for today

Act 4: At The City Gate

Ruth 4: 1-22

We left the story of Ruth at a point of high tension – a cliff-hanger in fact. Mr. Darcy has declared his love for the beautiful Ruth. He has behaved with the utmost honour and integrity and now only one thing stands in the way of everlasting happiness – the self-seeking and self-centred Mr. Wickham. Will Mr. Darcy win out? Will the embittered Naomi find some sort of resolution to the emptiness that plagues her life? In short, will they all live happily ever after?

The final episode of our romantic drama opens with Mr. Darcy, better known to us as Boaz, taking the initiative. Act 4, scene 1 (4:1-12) takes place at the gates of Bethlehem. I do not intend to draw significance out of obscure and long-dead legal practises. (Note that the use of sandals as a legal instrument had already died out when this story was written down). It is what we can understand that speaks so loudly.

Again the story hints that there is more going on here than meets the eye. 4:1 gives us another example of the ‘God moments’ that occur so frequently in this story. ‘No sooner had Boaz gone up to the gate and sat down there than the next-of-kin, of whom Boaz had spoken, came passing by.’ This is not simply a coincidence but the hidden hand of God at work once more.

Boaz’s open words are telling, but often weakened by modern translations. The old KJV is most accurate with its strange sounding, ‘Ho, such a one.’ It is impossible that Boaz did not know this man’s name so it has been removed by the story writer, and for a purpose. 4:5, 10 and 14 speak of perpetuating the family name, but this man has no name, he is forgotten.

Having ‘fortuitously’ met with this man, Boaz gathers a legal team together. The story one again draws together divine intervention (seen in the ‘coincidental’ arrival of the nearer relative) and human endeavour (as Boaz rounds up the 10 elders). In our walk with God, both are required.

Boaz opens the negotiations and immediately introduces something new. No one has mentioned a field before this. Is Naomi a landowner, and not as poor as we have been led to believe? What is at issue here is Naomi’s rights to her husband’s land. Presumably, before leaving for Moab, Elimelech had sold his land. Now Naomi is back she has the right, but not the means, to buy back that land. It is the role of the kinsman-redeemer to step in to aid his disposed relative. By redeeming the land for Naomi the nearer relative will add the land to his own estate if Naomi dies without an heir. This makes good business sense. However, this law (laid down in Leviticus 25) was not given for business reasons but a protection of the poor and powerless. The nearer relative

does not view it this way. At first jumps at the opportunity of gaining the land, but changes his mind when he is told the package includes a Moabitess widow.

There is something unpleasant afoot here. There is more than the worry that this younger woman might produce an heir, and so divert the land back to Elimelech's family, after all, he would be well placed to make sure Ruth had no children. I think there is an element of self-righteousness here. This is, after all, a foreign woman and the law forbids marrying such women. How would it look for this man to marry a Moabitess? Don't forget, this story, though set in the time of the Judges, was written down much later, at the time of the return from Exile. At that time individual conformity to the Law was paramount and marrying foreign women was named as a particularly insidious sin (see Ezra 9-11). This unnamed kinsman-redeemer is doing exactly what he ought. He is the picture of orthodoxy. Boaz, on the other hand, though undoubtedly the hero of this story, is willing to flout the law! I suspect that this little book would have been considered not a little subversive in the more respectable Jewish homes in post-Exile Judah.

Boaz is seen to be the righteous one by the town elders, shown by their blessing of Boaz's action. A blessing fulfilled in that we remember the honour and integrity of Boaz today, but as for the other man, we do not even know his name.

Scene 2 of this final act (4:13-17) returns to the underlying question of the whole of this story – Naomi's emptiness. As a story it is straightforward. Boaz marries Ruth; Naomi gains a grandson and the protection and provision of a family. Life is not as bleak as she imagined. But this is not just a story of all's well that ends well. Ruth had been barren for ten years, now she has a son almost straight away. The story teller is explicit here – Obed is born because 'the LORD made her conceive' (4:12). Boaz could do what is right, but he could not of himself give Ruth a child, nor could he restore Naomi's emptiness. It is only through God's grace and power these things would happen.

In some ways God seems hardly present in this story. In only two verses is any action directly attributed to God. In 1:6 he brings food to Bethlehem, and in 4:13 he enables Ruth to conceive. But on closer inspection, God is everywhere. Boaz, by consistently acting with honour and integrity, brings hope into the lives of others. Ruth, by her loving commitment to Naomi and God, sees results that she could never have dreamed of. In this story we see the faithfulness of God. And as it was then, so today. In a fallen world that seems to have lost all direction and certainty, this important little book re-affirms time and again the sovereignty and providence of God. God restores Naomi, and he restores us. Sometimes, we, with Naomi, feel this process seems slow and unjust and we may feel the need to help things along by our own efforts, but gradually and definitely, God acts to bring us back. Sometimes his hand is seen in direct action, but more often it is through acts of *hesed* by others that God demonstrates *hesed* to us.

Amen

Kevin Dare
Sunday Online, 26 July 2020