



Ruth 3: Poverty, power, provision

A service of worship to guide
reflections

on Sunday 02 August 2020

Introduction

Today is the third week in our four-week study of the Book of Ruth as part of the Methodist Church's "Bible month". We are looking at Ruth Chapter 3. We focus on the part that Ruth plays in finding a way out of poverty and vulnerability for herself and her mother-in-law, Naomi. In this story, goodness is met by goodness, and a new family becomes possible.

Hymn

**Sing for God's glory that colours the dawn of creation –
*Singing the Faith 116***

These are new words to the tune *Lobe Den Herren* which is often the tune used for the well-known hymn "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of Creation".

- 1 Sing for God's glory that colours the dawn of creation,
racing across the sky, trailing bright clouds of elation ;
sun of delight
succeeds the velvet of night,
warming the earth's exultation.
- 2 Sing for God's power that shatters the chains that would bind
us,
searing the darkness of fear and despair that could blind us,
touching our shame
with love that will not lay blame,
reaching out gently to find us.
- 3 Sing for God's justice disturbing each easy illusion,
tearing down tyrants and putting our pride to confusion ;
lifblood of right,
resisting evil and slight,
offering freedom's transfusion.

4 Sing for God's saints who have travelled faith's journey before us,
who in our weariness give us their hope to restore us ;
in them we see
the new creation to be,
spirit of love made flesh for us.

Kathy Galloway (*b* 1952)

Prayer

Loving God we thank you for the indescribable gift that is life. We praise you for all the sensations we can enjoy of taste and touch, sound and smell, movement and balance. Most of all we thank you that Jesus tells us and shows us how we are loved by you and that we can sense that love and return it and share it. We are sorry though for the times when we have not offered your love and mercy as we are called to do. Help us to remember that because of you we are not left stuck in a difficult place. May we know what it is to be made in your image Lord God and redeemed to grow into the likeness of Christ. Amen.

Introduction – a recap of the story of “Ruth”

The Bible book of Ruth contains the story of Naomi's family from Bethlehem who fall on hard times. Having moved to Moab in search of food, all the men in Naomi's family die and she is left with only her Moabite daughters-in-law. Naomi returns to Bethlehem in search of better prospects and her daughter-in-law Ruth loyally comes back with her. At the time of the barley harvest Ruth goes out into the fields of Naomi's relative Boaz to lift the left-overs. Boaz is kind to Ruth but gleaning corn is only a temporary help. Naomi and Ruth need to find a more permanent solution to their plight of hunger and insecurity. In chapter 3 we hear Naomi explain a plan to Ruth who then puts it into action.

Bible reading - Ruth chapter 3

3 Some time later Naomi said to Ruth, "I must find a husband for you, so that you will have a home of your own. ² Remember that this man Boaz, whose women you have been working with, is our relative. Now listen. This evening he will be threshing the

barley. ³ So wash yourself, put on some perfume, and get dressed in your best clothes. Then go where he is threshing, but don't let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. ⁴ Be sure to notice where he lies down, and after he falls asleep, go and lift the covers and lie down at his feet. He will tell you what to do."

⁵ Ruth answered, "I will do everything you say." ⁶ So Ruth went to the threshing place and did just what her mother-in-law had told her. ⁷ When Boaz had finished eating and drinking, he was in a good mood. He went to the pile of barley and lay down to sleep. Ruth slipped over quietly, lifted the covers and lay down at his feet. ⁸ During the night he woke up suddenly, turned over, and was surprised to find a woman lying at his feet. ⁹ "Who are you?" he asked.

"It's Ruth, sir," she answered. "Because you are a close relative, you are responsible for taking care of me. So please marry me."

¹⁰ "The LORD bless you," he said. "You are showing even greater family loyalty in what you are doing now than in what you did for your mother-in-law. You might have gone looking for a young man, either rich or poor, but you haven't. ¹¹ Now don't worry, Ruth. I will do everything you ask; as everyone in town knows, you are a fine woman. ¹² It is true that I am a close relative and am responsible for you, but there is a man who is a closer relative than I am. ¹³ Stay here the rest of the night, and in the morning we will find out whether or not he will take responsibility for you. If so, well and good; if not, then I swear by the living LORD that I will take the responsibility. Now lie down and stay here till morning."

¹⁴ So she lay there at his feet, but she got up before it was light enough for her to be seen, because Boaz did not want anyone to know that she had been there. ¹⁵ Boaz said to her, "Take off your cloak and spread it out here." She did, and he poured out almost fifty pounds of barley and helped her lift it to her shoulder. Then she returned to town with it. ¹⁶ When she arrived home, her mother-in-law asked her, "How did you get along, daughter?"

Ruth told her everything that Boaz had done for her. ¹⁷ She added, "He told me I must not come back to you empty-handed, so he gave me all this barley."

18 Naomi said to her, "Now be patient, Ruth, until you see how this all turns out. Boaz will not rest today until he settles the matter."

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Comment

If you ever feel that you are stuck in a really difficult problem then Ruth chapter 3 offers a great strategy for finding a way out. What we see here is first of all that a problem or need is recognised for what it is, then someone who can help is identified, and then that person is asked for help – in a nice way.

In today's passage, Naomi starts the strategy off by recognising the problem, namely that her widowed daughter-in-law Ruth needs a home of her own. Being widowed meant that Ruth, and Naomi, also, were trapped in poverty with no security. At the time when the book was written (probably some 400-500 years before the birth of Jesus) only marriage to a man could give a woman security. Naomi knew just the person who could help. Her relative Boaz had already been kind to Ruth by letting her glean and receive extra leftovers in his field at harvest time. He himself might act as a next of kin to buy Naomi's land or better still he might marry Ruth. So Naomi dispatches Ruth to ask Boaz for help and she does this in a most surprising and prepossessing way.

Thankfully, when Ruth asks Boaz for help, he is impressed again by Ruth's great loyalty to Naomi. He also admires her willingness to make this request for help to him and not to some younger man. And he agrees to get the problem sorted out, one way or another. Boaz is willing to use his power for good and to empower Ruth and Naomi.

This story puts me in mind a little of Jane Austen's book *Pride and Prejudice* where the genteel but low-earning Bennet family have five daughters. In the eighteenth century this meant finding five husbands to secure a future for the young women. The novel famously starts with the lines: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife. However little known the feelings or

views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of someone or other of their daughters.”

Marriage was until relatively recently for many people largely about money or economic security. Yet, to view Naomi as an early Mrs Bennet, misses so much that is important and of God in this Bible passage. For Naomi uses her God-given wits to help Ruth and Boaz fulfil the law of God (as understood at that time) and create security and a new family. She also brings together two people who have exhibited significant goodness and who are generous in their relating to others. This bringing together of people when done well, serves God and God’s purposes. It releases a wonderful provision.

Naomi and Ruth have to be bold to bring about the commitment of Boaz to help. Naomi is no stranger to boldness as she is a woman who is not afraid to move on and out when times require it. Ruth too is bold and she is not afraid to ask Boaz to help her. Boaz is the one who while good, maybe hasn’t been as bold as he could have been. While he looked out for Ruth when she was gleaning in his field, he has not taken the next steps to help secure a future for her. Perhaps he hoped the closer relative would do it. Perhaps he thought he was too old himself for Ruth to be interested in him or maybe he too was a little put-off by Ruth being a foreign woman. Whatever was holding him back has to be overcome. The strategy that Naomi devises and Ruth enacts is that bit of encouragement he needs. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Families are created in all kinds of different ways. Along the path of life God works through good committed, relationships to bring us what we need. Yet, it is ultimately God who redeems us. In Jesus we have the opportunity to belong to a whole new family. Whatever feelings we have of anxiety, we can bring to God. Whatever problems we identify, we can ask our Lord to help. That is a strategy that Jesus recommends and that many have found to be sound.

I am reminded of the story in a Russian saying. What does the Russian fisherman do when he is out at sea and observes that a storm is coming? Well he prays and rows for the shore! So we too

when faced with problems, can pray, use our wits, and seek out the help and security we need. For while ultimate redemption comes from God, we find it offered in practical ways by people who exhibit God's loving-kindness.

Hymn

What a friend we have in Jesus – *Singing the faith 531*

- 1 What a friend we have in Jesus,
all our sins and griefs to bear !
What a privilege to carry
everything to God in prayer !
O what peace we often forfeit,
O what needless pain we bear,
all because we do not carry
everything to God in prayer !

- 2 Have we trials and temptations,
is there trouble anywhere ?
We should never be discouraged :
take it to the Lord in prayer.
Can we find a friend so faithful

who will all our sorrows share ?
Jesus knows our every weakness :
take it to the Lord in prayer.

- 3 Are we weak and heavy-laden,
cumbered with a load of care ?
Precious Saviour, still our refuge —
take it to the Lord in prayer !
Do your friends despise, forsake you ?
Take it to the Lord in prayer ;
in his arms he'll take and shield you,
you will find a solace there.

Joseph Medicott Scriven

Prayers

The psalmist, like Naomi is not afraid to ask for help, so we can use these words as our own:

Psalm 86

Listen to me, LORD, and answer me, for I am helpless and weak.

² Save me from death, because I am loyal to you; save me, for I am your servant and I trust in you.

⁵ You are good to us and forgiving, full of constant love for all who pray to you.

⁹ All the nations that you have created will come and bow down to you; they will praise your greatness.

¹⁰ You are mighty and do wonderful things; you alone are God.

¹¹ Teach me, LORD, what you want me to do, and I will obey you faithfully; teach me to serve you with complete devotion.

¹² I will praise you with all my heart, O Lord my God; I will proclaim your greatness forever.

¹⁵ But you, O Lord, are a merciful and loving God, always patient, always kind and faithful.

¹⁶ Turn to me and have mercy on me; strengthen me and save me, because I serve you just as my mother did.

We add our own prayers for those we know who are helpless and weak, hungry or afraid and we pray God's help for them, and for courage that we may play our part in bringing that help.

We use Lord's Prayer to complete our petitions:

Our Father in heaven, may your holy name be honoured; may your Kingdom come; may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today the food we need.

Forgive us the wrongs we have done, as we forgive the wrongs that others have done to us. Save us from the time of trial; and keep us safe from evil.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and for ever. Amen

Hymn

In Christ there is no east or west – *Singing the Faith* 685

Our final hymn picks up the theme in Ruth of God's family crossing borders and the connection we can experience through Christ.

- 1 In Christ there is no east or west,
in him no south or north,
but one great fellowship of love
throughout the whole wide earth.
- 2 In him shall true hearts
everywhere
their high communion find ;
his service is the golden cord
close-binding humankind.
- 3 Join hands then all the human
race,
whate'er your nation be ;
all children of the living God
are surely kin to me.
- 4 In Christ now meet both east
and west,
in him meet south and north ;
all Christlike souls are one in
him,
throughout the whole wide
earth.

John Oxenham, pseud.

Blessing

On those who are bowed down:

the blessing of God.

On those who do not know which way to turn:

the blessing of God.

On those who disagree and don't yet know how to be at peace:

the blessing of God.

On those who today celebrate good news:

the blessing of God.

On those who today make a new beginning:

the blessing of God.

On you, and on me,

the blessing of God.

Creator, Redeemer and
Guiding Spirit

**for evermore – and for
now.**

Amen.

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