

Julie's sermon on Ruth – Ruth 1: 8-17

May the words I speak by your words and not mine and may the message you have for us reach our hearts as well as our ears! Amen

Well this week we are continuing our sermon series on men and women in the bible and having had 3 great men I thought it was about time we had some great women and so this week we are looking at Ruth! If you are not familiar with her story can I just encourage you to read the book of Ruth in its entirety because it is only 4 chapters and has 85 verses in total so at a steady pace can be read in about half an hour.

The book of Ruth is a great story - it is a love story but it is much more than that it's a story of great faithfulness, amazing trust and the wonderful grace of God. It is also a story of hope and we all need hope don't we! Here we see a girl from Moab, a place that God himself describes, in Psalm 60, as his washbasin. It is a pagan land that doesn't recognise God as Lord. But it doesn't matter because God has a plan for Ruth as you will discover if you read the story – where she comes from is not important – it is where she ends up and how she gets there that matters. Her faith and trust takes her to an unknown land where she meets and marries Boaz and gives birth to Obed who is the grandfather of King David and we know this because they are listed as ancestors of Jesus by both Matthew and Luke. It is an amazing story!!

So let's have a look at this story and particularly at those verses we heard today.

The story begins with a very brief history of how Ruth became the daughter in law of Naomi who was the widow of Elimelech. Elimelech and his family lived in Bethlehem in Judah and we are told that there was a famine in the land. He decides to move his family to Moab which was either a brave or foolish move as he was disobeying God by living amongst pagan people. After Elimelech dies his sons, Mahlon and Chilion marry Moabite women. We are not told anything about their lives only that both brothers die after about 10 years leaving Ruth, Mahlon's wife and Chilion's wife, Orpah, widows together with their mother in law, Naomi. With both husband and sons gone Naomi is left without anyone who could provide for her. She hears that the people in Judah, her homeland, have been blessed by God and have a good harvest and she decides she should return home to find any living relatives who could look after her. Some of you may already know that in those days, widows were normally cared for by their family and surviving brothers were expected to marry their widowed sister in law. With no other sons to look after Ruth or Orpah, Naomi encourages them to stay with their own people and perhaps find a new husband who could care for them. To begin with both women protest and ask to stay with her but after some persuasion Orpah decides to return home but Ruth refuses and clings to Naomi promising to stay with her no matter what. She says in verse 16 "Do not ask me to leave you; let me go with you! Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you live, I will live; your people will be my people and your God will be my God".

This is quite a commitment and shows amazing trust. The more you read these words and think about them the more amazing they become. Ruth could have walked away and had a much simpler and probably easier life but her commitment to her destitute mother-in-law means certain hardship and difficulty. And it meant that her life was never going to be the same again. Firstly, it meant leaving her own family and land forever she would never return. That took real courage and trust in God. Many of us have been without our family and friends over the lockdown – 14 weeks or thereabouts – can you imagine being without them forever, never talking to them or seeing them again – and no Skype, Whatsapp or Zoom to keep in touch in those days!!

Secondly, it meant a life of widowhood and childlessness, because Naomi has no more sons to give, and if Ruth married a non-relative, her commitment to Naomi would have to come to an end as she would be committed to her new family. So she had to trust that God would provide for her and Naomi so that they wouldn't starve! Thirdly, it meant going to an unknown land with new people, new customs and a new language. That must have been terrifying. I know how scary it is to move to a place where you know no one but at least I speak the same language – well nearly!! Liverpool was a challenge!!

Imagine how you would feel if you had to move somewhere where you couldn't understand what was being said.

But the most amazing commitment of all was when she said: "Your God will be my God". Remember she comes from a pagan land where they worship many gods and she is now with Naomi who is very bitter and angry with God because she believes he has turned against her. Not much of a role model!!

It is possible that Ruth was someone we would describe as on the fringe today because she would have heard the stories about what God had done for the Israelites from Mahlon her husband and so may have been wondering about what God could do for her for many years but not actually taken any leap of faith! Orpah must have heard the same stories but when it came to the crunch she left and went back home because she could not trust God in the same way. Ruth however trusted God enough to accept the challenges that went with her commitment to follow him.

Here is an example of devotion far beyond the call of duty, and on that level alone Ruth's story has so much to teach us concerning commitment to family, friends and how we must trust in God.

The most amazing thing about all this was that Ruth was an outsider. Not only was she a woman so had no status or voice; she was also a Gentile, and therefore a second-class citizen compared with God's chosen people. Yet here she was giving herself not only to Naomi but to God. She was stepping out into the unknown and trusting God to show her the way!

Because of Ruth's faith and commitment God led her to Boaz and she became his wife and the great grandmother of David. God had a plan – he knew that Ruth was important to that plan and by showing her his love and giving her the strength and courage to stay with Naomi she was in the right place at the right time to fulfil that plan.

We hear in the gospel reading how God says he will take our burdens and give us rest and that was so true for Ruth! Bishop Jonathan has recorded a sermon on the gospel reading which you can find on a separate video on my YouTube channel and I would encourage you to watch it as it is very good!

The story of Ruth gives us hope because no matter where we are from and what we believe we can chose to follow God and he will use us and reward us just as he did with Ruth. Because with God there are no outsiders and no one is a second class citizen – we are all equal and all loved and each one of us is accepted for who we are. But that means that everyone else is accepted too and we cannot judge or exclude anyone. Sometimes that is not easy because it's human nature to judge.

I have been in churches where they talk about how wonderful it would be if everyone believed in Jesus but when someone who is very different to them comes to their church they judge them and often forget how to show them Christian love and so they never see that newcomer again!

We are living in a time when lots of people have been asking questions about God and have been looking for answers. We have a responsibility to show them the love of God through our words and our actions. We have all been given a new start when it comes to our churches because how it used to be is not how it will be going forward. There may be new people coming through the doors of our churches and we should rejoice and make them feel like they belong – because they do!!

I love the story of Ruth because it gives hope to those who have been on the fringe for many years and gives them courage to take a step towards God. I love it because it tells those of us who have been followers of Jesus all our lives that there is room for everyone – we just need to take a step to the side to make room and let them in. I love it because it tells those of us who are getting older that if we allow them – then the young ones will take care of us and it tells the young ones that they need to make a commitment and not be afraid to fight for what they believe.

The book of Ruth is about love, faithfulness, hope and grace but most of all it is about trusting God because without that trust Ruth would have just gone home and she would not have been the Great Grandmother of King David and an ancestor of Jesus!!

God had a plan – he still does – are you willing to be part of it!!

Amen