

Welfare State, Boaz and Kundai

In the UK we tend to believe that we have one of the earliest welfare states in the world, but there is a welfare state that came into existence over 3,000 years ago. It didn't have quite the same benefits system, but it was designed to ensure that no one went hungry, and the most marginalised in society would be cared for. It was part of the law that Moses gave to the Israelites before they came into the promised land. As an agricultural society, it was key that those on the fringes had access to the blessings of the harvest, so this is what God commanded them in Leviticus 19: ⁹*“When you harvest the crops of your land, do not harvest the grain along the edges of your fields, and do not pick up what the harvesters drop. ¹⁰It is the same with your grape crop—do not strip every last bunch of grapes from the vines, and do not pick up the grapes that fall to the ground. Leave them for the poor and the foreigners living among you. I am the LORD your God”*.

Unfortunately the Israelites didn't always keep that commandment, but one man who did was Boaz. When Ruth the Moabitess came into his field to take advantage of the law, he not only allowed her to glean around the edges of the field – he went far further than the letter of the law. In so doing he modelled what Jesus would teach about going the extra mile many hundreds of years later. He protected Ruth from possible abuse from his male workers and made sure she had access to shelter, food and drink. Ruth chapter 2 shows us that Boaz was the sort of employer it would be a delight to work for!

In our country we don't allow those in the asylum system to work until they have gained refugee status. Sometimes that takes many years, and it is one of the things that demoralizes them most. In many years of working with asylum seekers – mostly those whose claims had been refused and who had been made destitute – I have found very few who did not want to work and contribute to our society. Often they have skills that we are crying out for, like doctors, engineers, teachers, but they are not allowed to practise. Many come from countries where it's shameful not to earn your own living, and being unable to do that seriously affects their self-esteem, and often their mental health too.

A good example of this is a lady from Zimbabwe called Kundai, who I am proud to call my friend. She was refused asylum here, went through a very difficult time and an abusive relationship, and almost ended up on the streets. One of the host families at the Boaz Trust took her in until we found a place for her in one of our houses for the destitute. She was in quite a state, but gradually began to blossom as she experienced God's love through her hosts and the staff at Boaz. Kundai eventually got her refugee status, studied hard at college and was able to use her wonderful talents as a pastry chef. At one point she worked for James Martin in Manchester, before moving on to new culinary challenges. Since coming back to a vibrant faith in Jesus she has always wanted to give back, so she now puts on a delicious Wednesday 'High Tea for the Elderly' in Burnage. Even lockdown didn't stop her: now she delivers the high teas to their homes.

Like most asylum seekers I know, Kundai didn't come here for handouts. Over the years I have learned that, like Ruth in Boaz's field, we must not just do good *to* people, which is a necessary first step, but also enable them to flourish and use the God-given talents that we are all blessed with.