



The book of Ruth, and indeed the parts of it contained in the lectionary, place Ruth clearly in her context. Despite this being her story, she is first introduced as a Moabite wife. In two words, readers understand that she is a nobody – a foreign woman. If, as some commentators propose, the story was written at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, she is not just any foreigner, she is an “abomination” (Ezra 9:1) who “should never enter the assembly of God” (Nehemiah 13:23-27). Ruth is cast out by religious and racial purity.

As Ruth gleanes in the Bethlehem fields, Boaz notices her. His first question concerns ownership: “who does she belong to?” Women were valuable assets at the time, able to do for men what they could not do for themselves – have children. Socially, politically and religiously children brought men prestige. Ruth, then, is an

unprotected asset vulnerable to the pestering of any male harvester who so chooses. Both Boaz and Naomi make this clear. Ruth seems defenceless against unwanted attentions.

Finally, Ruth is unappreciated by the other woman central to this story, her mother-in-law. Apparently, Naomi prefers to send Ruth out into the fields, than ask for help from her rich and prominent kinsman. When Ruth returns from a hard day’s work, Naomi takes what she wants from the fruit of Ruth’s labours, giving Ruth the leftovers. Naomi treats Ruth as, at best, a servant. Naomi shows no appreciation either of Ruth. “Call me Mara,” she says when they arrive in Bethlehem, “for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me, the Lord has brought me back empty, the Lord has dealt harshly with me, the Lord has brought calamity upon me.” It’s what, in my family we call a fit of the PLOMs – Poor Little Old Me. Even at the end of the story we are told “Naomi took the child” and the local women said “God has not left you without next of kin ... a son has been born to *Naomi*.”

Earlier this year, before lockdown, I was chatting with my seven year-old granddaughter. Why, she wanted to know, are women in the Bible weak and not in control of their own lives? Reading the story of Ruth as I have done above confirms my granddaughter’s suspicions. In the context of culture, community and custom, Ruth is outcast, unprotected and unappreciated.

But Ruth is a disruptive character from the start.

Where the religious and racial purity party of Ezra and Nehemiah deny her a place among the people of God, Ruth asserts her right to be one of them. “Your people will be my people, your God will be my God,” she says to Naomi. Ruth has rightly understood God’s covenant as it was before the new nationalism. Membership of God’s people was open to all. Ruth asserts her God-given right to choose to enter the covenant. Where Ruth is vulnerable to the attentions of predatory men, she turns the cultural table and uses her sexuality to

secure a future for herself. She comes to Boaz in his bed and, whatever else happens reminds him of his responsibilities – “you are my kinsman”.

I’d like to finish this piece with the ending my granddaughter Martha gave to her version of the story of Ruth:

“Ruth was a very strong-minded person. She made what she thought were the right decisions, and she took risks. She went to live in Bethlehem even though she would be a foreigner there. She went with Naomi even though she didn’t have to. And she risked her good name to win a bigger prize.” (Martha Curry, 2020, aged 7)

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