

A manifesto for women

Ruth 1: 1-18

This Sunday and next our lectionary offers us a small window onto the book of Ruth. As I often say to my wife (of the same name), Ruth is a mystery wrapped up in an enigma. In her case that isn't *exactly* true; but the book of Ruth certainly is not just the simple, heart-warming tale it may seem on the surface. In fact there is much complexity in this little book of the Hebrew Scriptures that is worthy of far more than two weeks of study. As one commentator has said it is "a brilliant polemical performance under the guise of an antique and innocuous tale."¹ I'd encourage you to read Ruth in its entirety before next week's second installment.

Listen again to the first verse of Ruth; herein lie all the main themes of the book.

Long ago, in the time of the Judges, there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the Moabite country with his wife and his two sons.

The first verse is very similar structurally and in terms of characterisation to other stories in the Old Testament, notably the book of Job that we have read over recent weeks. It introduces a man and his family, and tells us just a little about the circumstances of time, place and event.

The important thing about this contextualisation is that the original readers would have perceived them negatively. The time of the Judges was seen retrospectively as a time of national disappointment if not disgrace; the event of famine speaks for itself as a time of trial; the mention of Moabites would be associated with hostility, sexual immorality and idolatry ... indeed Deuteronomy 23:6 explicitly excludes Moabites from the house of the Lord. So we immediately realize that this is a book about people in distress.

Note also how it is the man to whom we are first introduced. In verse 2 he is named as Elimelech, his wife Naomi and their two sons Mahlon and Chilion – names that translate as "sickness" and "wasting", giving us another note of foreboding. Things quickly turn sour. In verse 3 we hear of Elimelech's death, the sons then marrying into the hostile tribe of Moab, and then the two son themselves both die. By verse 5 we realize that this is not going to be the usual story about a man, but actually it is the story of three women, all widows: and older Jewish woman and her two Moabite daughters-in-law.

So in five tightly-packed verses we are introduced to three interlocking themes that will be explored in this short book:

- **Survival:** life at its basic level in time of famine and displacement
- **Women:** show-casing their resourcefulness, courage, good sense and solidarity in times of trial

¹ LaCocque, A. 1990, *The Feminine Unconventional: Four Subversive Figures in Israel's Tradition*, Minneapolis, Fortress (p84)

- **Identity:** ethnic, cultural and religious identity, explored here at the personal level but clearly having implications for nations life as well.

These three themes, critical at the time Ruth was written, are just as relevant today. Indeed there is a case for arguing that their significance is even more pronounced in our modern world. Let's look at them in a little more detail.

Survival

More people than ever before are displaced. Economic migrants, refugees from war and oppression; huge swathes of our world are affected – Kenya, Sudan, Somalia, Rwanda, Congo, Syria, Iraq, Turkey, Lebanon, Burma, Bangladesh, Thailand ... the list goes on and on. Increasing numbers in this country are feeling the pinch as well – out of work, benefits cut, without funds to pay for heating, old and infirm displaced from families to look after them. And there's no sign of things getting better anytime soon. Economy, environment, democracy, development – it's all under very real threat. It would not be an exaggeration to say that life is increasingly about survival: as individuals, as families, as nations, as a world. The Book of Ruth has something to say to us today.

But what exactly does it have to say? I think the true answer can only be found in conjunction with our other two themes. But note this: famine is stated in Ruth as purely a matter of fact, and so too is the solution. Naomi we are told went off with her daughters-in-law in search of food. The struggle for survival is at the heart of the story; it knows no bounds as it moves them from Bethlehem to Judah to Moab and back. An ordinary family must go in search of food wherever it can be found.

I don't want to sound trite, as if to suggest that famine is something we should just accept as inevitable (it isn't, and we should be doing much, much more to prevent it) and yet for the majority of our brothers and sisters across the globe it is either a daily reality or a daily threat. And, barring extreme situations, they aren't complaining – they simply get on with the business of finding food, of surviving day to day. They are none the less human, fulfilled, happy or close to God than those who do not share their basic worries. In fact, I vouch that many of them are more human, more fulfilled, happier and closer to God than we who have so much more. Who then is to be pitied?

I find that a sobering thought, a timely reminder. We fight for justice, for fair taxes, for financial support to those in poverty here and in other countries; but we should be careful, oh so very careful ... they do not need or want our pity. Better that we shine that particular mirror on ourselves.

Women

The Book of Ruth is firmly counter-cultural in that it celebrates the role of women. Without resorting to violence or intimidation; without any of the trappings of power; but with exhibitions of tenderness, of outstanding mutual support, of inventiveness and resourcefulness, these women not only survive – they positively thrive and are greatly blessed by God.

These are stories that we need to hear today. Only last Friday I heard Desert Island Discs on the radio, interviewing a lady called Hilary Devey. Hers was a story of survival – she endured rape as a child, an impoverished upbringing, three failed marriages and a stroke, but she managed to build a road haulage business with 8000 staff almost all of whom are male. She spoke without a trace of bitterness about her background, without a hint of arrogance about her business success, and with evident, enduring compassion for those whom she employed.

Suffice it to say, with honorable exceptions including some in this church today, this is not the kind of talk one generally associates with men, least of all in such a macho environment. But these values – shared with Ruth and Naomi – are so clearly what is needed to resolve so many of the world's problems today, whether in politics or business or education or medicine or sport or, dare I say it, in religion.

I do a lot of work in developing countries, and you'd be amazed by how much of the development budget is spent on empowering women. For every \$ spent, there is a far greater return if it is spent with women. Then you can be almost certain it will feed children or improve education or break down barriers or build good governance or remove graft. Last year's Nobel Peace prize was shared by two African women, and for very good reason. It is the emancipation of women that is leading to economic growth in Africa, that has hugely reduced social inequalities in Bangladesh, that offers a glimmer of hope for peaceful, just democracy in the Middle East.

Identity

Themes of survival and the role of women are important to understanding the message of Ruth; but their impact is only fully understood in conjunction with the third theme of ethnic and cultural identity. The book of Ruth dispels myths about other ethnic groups, specifically the Moabites, and insists on national or religious identity being interwoven with shared values of compassion. Integral to achieving this harmonious outcome are the women of the story. Boaz, a rich relation of Naomi, is part of the solution, but he is enticed into his role through the scheming and the acting of the women: they are the protagonists; he the ultimately willing assistant.

And how much better would our world be if it were ever thus? Is it conceivable that there would be so many wars if women were in charge of the weapons (and the budget for weapons)? Is it likely we would be facing a war or terrorism if religious education in all faith groups were in the hands of women? Is it possible that the dialogue between ethnic groups in our own society might be immeasurably improved if the dialogue was led by women? Why is it that our football stadia are places of sectarian chanting, our football pitches places of racist abuse; our streets from time to time taken over with sectarian marches ... might it just be because of the prevalence of men in these places?

I've been reading a book on dialogue over the past 30 years in London between Jewish, Christian and Muslim communities². It's a hugely encouraging book, and yet it is far removed from the depiction of these faith groups in the media. It is a dialogue of equals, a dialogue of listening, a dialogue of women as much as men. It manages to separate matters of Jewish faith from Israeli politics, to separate matters of Muslim belief from Islamic terrorism, and to acknowledge history, whether crusades or holocaust, without being bound by it. It is a dialogue of reconciliation, such as in the book of Ruth we find between Israelites and Moabites, and just as in Ruth it takes form at the personal level. It's a dialogue that begins to make one feel proud of the positive contribution religion can make, and offers a glimmer of hope to a barren world. To use a phrase recently banned by the Government, it offers us "green shoots of recovery".

The Book of Ruth ends with the declaration that Ruth was to Naomi better than seven sons. In such a patriarchal society that is an extraordinary statement, but as Jack Miles says, "with Ruth the shoe fits and she wears it with a certain flourish"³. May her wisdom be spread abroad in our world today to overcome poverty and want, to spread compassion and justice, to build bridges between people and nations, and to do it all for the glory of God.

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Preached at Armadale Methodist Church, 4 November 2012

² Bayfield T, Race A, Siddiqui A (Ed), 2012, *Beyond the Dysfunctional Family*, London, The Manor House Abrahamic Dialogue Group

³ Miles, J. 1996, *God: A Biography*, New York, Vintage (p 341)