

## Gleaning (Ruth 2; Mt 25.31-46)



You should have a visual aid as **quick recap** on last week. This **famous painting by William Blake** (he wasn't just a poet) emphasises the main points of Chapter 1 – Orpah turns back to a relatively secure future in Moab whereas Ruth ignores Naomi's entreaties and clings to her, for better or worse. The bitter widowed mother is returning to her kinsmen in Bethlehem whereas her loyal daughter-in-law is setting off into the unknown, to a land where she will always be a foreigner.

### So what happens in the long chapter 2 Barbara has read so well?

The book of **Ruth is unique** in scripture – 55 out of 85 verses are direct speech. Chapter 2 is built around **five dialogues**. If you are the sort of person who likes to see a pattern in things then it is what is called a chiasmic structure – Ruth talking to Naomi (v.2), Boaz to the reapers (vv.4-7), **Boaz to Ruth (vv.8-14)**, Boaz to the reapers again (vv.15-16) and to complete the picture, Naomi talking to Ruth (vv. 19-22).

But most of us are probably more interested in **what the chapter says**, rather than how it says it.

First of all, **Boaz** is introduced as *a man of standing* (v.1) – a military leader or any wealthy or honourable person. In today's language, "a good catch!"

**Ruth shares centre stage** with Boaz, while Naomi fades into the background. Ruth is portrayed as taking the initiative: she suggests going out to glean grain, in the hope of finding favour with "someone" (v.2). She is a hard committed worker (v.7), grateful (v.10) and obedient, *a woman of noble character* (3.11), so

a good match for Boaz. She is humble too: *I do not have the standing of one of your servants* (v.13) reminds me of the Prodigal Son story.

I'm struck by a phrase in verse 3: ***As it happened*** or ***As it turned out***. Accident or design? Some people might dismiss Ruth's choice of field as pure chance, but in the midst of this story of hunger, bereavement and complex relationships, this phrase suggests to me a story of God at work. *As it turned out* signals the **mysterious, providential activity of God's Spirit**, woven through the lives of ordinary people. Only a few days after listening to Naomi's bitter laments, Ruth unexpectedly finds herself among Boaz's workers on Boaz's land and relaxing in the warmth of Boaz's kindness.

This **encounter between Ruth and Boaz is at the heart of this chapter**, set in the social context of **gleaning**, an activity by which needy people, according to the law, were allowed to collect any grain left behind by the reapers. It wasn't just handouts. The needy had to try to help themselves, just as the best overseas aid helps destitute people to acquire the skills to find employment or set up their own micro-businesses.

We know that **Boaz is a pious man**: he blesses his reapers and they respond (v.4). He puts his faith into action and goes beyond what the law required. He provides protection, food, and direct access to the fields for a Moabite for ever labelled as a foreigner, even though she has adopted their faith. Sadly, the Duchess of Sussex will know the feeling in our supposedly enlightened country.

As she bows down before Boaz, Ruth asks: *Why have I found such favour in your eyes that you notice me – a foreigner?* (v.10). She is overwhelmed by his generosity and acknowledges his superior status. Her **social position** as a widow would be low anyway, but as a foreigner it is lower still.

How comforting it must have been for this *foreigner* to hear Boaz's **affirmation of her good deeds** (v.11). He would have been filled in on her background by Naomi herself or by others in the Bethlehem community, which can't have been a very big town at the time. His benevolence is the answer to Ruth's loving-kindness towards Naomi and her people. It's interesting to compare Boaz's words to Ruth: *You left your father and mother and your homeland to live with a people you did not know before* (v.11) with God's call to Abraham to **go from**

***your country, your people and your father's household to the land that I will show you.*** (Genesis 12.1).

Boaz uses the language of **rewards for good deeds** and God is described as one who rewards good behaviour: *May the Lord repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord* (v.12). This blessing from Boaz suggests that Ruth's sacrificial loving-kindness cannot be fully rewarded by Boaz's modest generosity. An **ephah** (v.17) or 20-30 kilos of barley a day was a huge amount (imagine a suitcase up to a 23kg airline limit!) for a day's work. Even so, a medieval rabbi put it like this: *God alone can adequately reward you for your act of **hesed*** (loving-kindness).

The chapter's final dialogue gives us **Naomi's overjoyed response** to Ruth's news of her *chance* encounter with Boaz. The passive, embittered widow Pat was talking about last week can finally acknowledge that the Lord's faithful loving-kindness, his **hesed**, has never abandoned her family, living or dead – and now she **includes Ruth in that family!**: *Boaz is a close relative; he is one of our **guardian-redeemers*** (v.20), a kinsman from her husband's clan (v.1) with the right and responsibility to help out a family member in financial straits (Leviticus 25.25-28).

Did you spot the **note of caution** in Naomi's words: ***one of our guardian-redeemers*** (v.20)? More about the competition next week and the week after!

There's **more ambiguity** (always a sign of a thrilling read) in the rest of the conversation between the two women. Boaz had asked Ruth to *stay with the women who work for me* (v.8) yet Ruth reported these instructions in broader terms: *Stay with my workers until they finish harvesting all the grain* (v.21). Could that reflect the greater openness in Moabite society? Or Ruth's anxiety about how to meet a man (perhaps among Boaz's workers) in this new community that has adopted her? Whatever motivates Ruth, she now quietly follows Naomi's advice to *go with the women .. because in someone else's field you might be harmed* (v.22). We get the impression that this is a rather rough workforce, possibly seasonal casual labour. With the harvest ending, the dangers recede for Ruth as an unprotected outsider but **her future** remains discouragingly unresolved. You'll have to come back next week!

## What can we “glean” (excuse the pun) from this story to challenge us in our Christian lives?

- A Japanese proverb says: *“One kind word can warm three winter months”*. Ruth and Boaz choose their words carefully. **Speech is important**. Would there have been the same bonding seen in the dialogues if everything had been done by email or social media? Can we talk and telephone friends and family members sometimes **instead of the default electronic option**? Just a thought.
- Ruth was a foreigner. Can we do anything to help shake off the revolting racism in Britain? A **journalist of colour at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival** last Sunday was handed a note, beginning with an expletive: *“Off back to your country. We are sick of you”*. This was the tenth time in four weeks that the lady had been “invited” or scornfully enjoined to **go back where she had come from!**
- Boaz helped Ruth to make ends meet. Can we support **missions and charities** which help people to stand on their own feet, rather than just providing handouts?
- It’s often said that actions speak louder than words, so **how about taking the initiative?** Has anyone ever had a really difficult journey with young children? I was cheered the other week, amidst all the unsettling news, when I read the story of **a young mother having a bad day on the train**. Her 3-year-old daughter was sick all the way from London to Newcastle. A moody-looking teenager soon got up and left the carriage, presumably fed up. **Not so**, he returned a few minutes later with a can of Coke and some chocolate. *“Coke’s good for you when you’re sick, innit it?”* He then handed the chocolate bar to the 6-year-old son and said *“be good for your mum, little man”*, before sitting down again and putting his earplugs back in, while the mother choked back tears of gratitude.

I wonder if the **teenager** was a Christian. I like to think he would have stood up for the **female Asian scientist** who was told by an elderly couple recently: *“Try and get your children to shut up or go back where you came from”*. And would **we** have done anything to help that mother, as she tried to stifle tears of sorrow in her adopted country?

Some of the same ideas can be seen in the Matthew passage Dilys read so well:

- There is dialogue, when the people ask the King, *Lord, when did we see you hungry .. or thirsty ..or needing clothes .. or ill .. or in prison?* (vv.37-39, 44)
- Jesus deals with conditions so often experienced by foreigners and refugees: hunger, thirst, loneliness, lack of suitable clothing, sickness, imprisonment
- The sheep on the right are commended for their actions, which surely involve taking the initiative

This brings us back to William Blake's picture, contrasting the destinations of Orpah and Ruth. Look at it again. Ruth is clinging to Naomi, who some people think looks a Christ-like figure. Perhaps the picture resonates with the clinging of the women at the foot of the cross, suggesting devotion and loving-kindness in the bleakest of circumstances.

You've got your own miniature to take home and use in prayer. Hopefully it will encourage us to **cling to our Lord, rather than turning away from him**. To be like the sheep taking the initiative, not the goats.