

## **Sermon – Ruth Chapter 3 / Sunday 18 August at 9.15 Service**

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Ruth Talk – Good Morning. Im Jonathan. I generally go to the later service but it's great to join you today. First lets pray – Lord I pray that you would help us all to think about the story of Ruth and hear in our hearts what you have to say to us today. Amen

I am sure that amongst us all here this morning there are a great many different love stories.

33 years ago I asked a girl out. She said ok but I'm emigrating to Australia in two weeks' time possibly for good. I met her parents at the airport when I went to say goodbye to her. I wrote every day and three months later we met in Thailand on holiday. I proposed on the first day and she accepted. Her parents had secretly booked a surprise cruise to Australia but by the time they got there she was already home in England – in their eyes I don't think I ever quite recovered from that.

Coming to Ruth Chapter 3 from another culture and time, we find a very complex and subtle love story. You will probably understand from what I've said that my own experience doesn't equip me at all well to patiently unravel ambiguities that have challenged Bible scholars. Matthew Henry in his famous commentary published in 1710 was clearly very troubled by the sensitivities for decency of Ruth's uncovering of Boaz's feet by night. He essentially says Ruth was a good girl and no one should think otherwise but don't try this approach now in our ungodly times or you will end up in the gossip columns..... But at its heart Chapter 3 contains an amazing message of both Hope and Love.

As a reminder in Chapters 1 and 2 Naomi and her husband were forced by famine to leave their home to settle in Moab, a hostile nation with different Gods. Their two sons married Moabite women but then Naomi's husband and sons all died. Naomi came back to Israel and Ruth, although a foreigner, insisted on coming with her to look after her. Naomi had lost everything and felt great bitterness towards God, renaming herself Mara, but Ruth went out to find food for them by picking up the grains that the harvesters left behind. Boaz had heard that Ruth had been kind to Naomi and allowed Ruth to glean in his fields. This was consistent with Jewish custom to provide for the poor (as we see with the Jubilee in Leviticus) but recognising Ruth's great vulnerability

as an alien woman without family Boaz went beyond simply observing custom to ensure that she received generosity and protection.

Now in Chapter 3 as we heard in our reading the harvest is at an end. Naomi and Ruth are again faced with the question of how they will get by. But you will have noticed that Naomi's attitude has completely changed since she learnt of Boaz's kindness to Ruth because Boaz is a close relative and not just that but a "guardian-redeemer" to their family. As Mike said when he preached on Chapter 2 last week, Naomi realises that this isn't a coincidence but a Godincidence, that the God who she thought had forgotten her does in fact have plans for her and she is no longer Mara.

Hope in God gives us energy and direction. That is because it transforms us into people who can actively make plans for the future in the confidence that God has plans for us and that we are called to play a part in them. I recently heard an economics podcast about a charity in the Philippines who wanted to check the effectiveness of their educational programme which was designed to alleviate poverty (Freakonomics Radio: "Is the Protestant Work Ethic Real?" No. 360 6 December 2018). They engaged a team of economists to devise a way of assessing this. The programme had three components – Livelihood (so ways to earn a living with skills training and small loans) , Health and Nutrition and Christian teaching. The assessment was carried out in 320 villages where all the inhabitants were in absolute poverty. The villages were split into 4 groups and 3 of them received just one of the 3 educational elements of the course for 6 months while the fourth received all 3 elements. At the end of the assessment the economists were astounded to find that the villages that had received only Christian teaching about Gods love and plans for them had shown significantly greater progress in reducing poverty than any of the other groups including the group that received all elements of the course. Once we understand that God has plans for us we have a hope that doesn't just enhance our skills or our knowledge – it is live changing.

So what we now see in Chapter 3 is Naomi, having faith in the blessings she and Ruth have already received to make plans for both of them. What is revealed as a result are two love stories – the one we read about directly in the Chapter and a much larger one that that embraces anyone who is prepared to respond to it. But first lets look at the obvious one..

Naomi's plan is to encourage Ruth to offer herself to Boaz in marriage. But the way this is to be done apparently involves Ruth taking a huge risk, making

herself vulnerable by lying down with Boaz while he is asleep at night and then waking him by uncovering his feet. There is a lot of context here that is difficult to understand but there are also a number of explanations.

Firstly as a woman and a foreigner its likely that marriage just wasn't something Ruth could ask for directly or Naomi could ask on her behalf. It is clear from the passage that she approaches Boaz in humility as a servant and supplicant asking him to spread his cloak of protection over her. The suggestion of marriage is therefore humble and implicit. The spreading of the cloak echoes Boaz own words in Chapter 2 asking that God "under whose wings you have have come to take refuge" may repay her for her kindness. Ruth is saying here to Boaz you can make your own prayer come true.

Secondly we see that Boaz was already aware of Ruth's goodness and faithfulness just as she was aware of his integrity and generosity so she could have much greater confidence in the outcome. They had each already formed an impression of each other during the harvest season that meant Ruth's gesture was much less likely to be misconstrued. This is confirmed when Boaz not only says he will marry Ruth but is concerned to do the right thing by speaking to the relative with closer claim first.

Thirdly Boaz seems to have been sufficiently older than Ruth to address her as daughter, and so the personal nature of Ruth's request conveyed a genuine desire on Ruths part to prefer a relationship with him over physical attraction to a younger man and to give him assurance that he would not be taking advantage, something he specifically mentions and thanks Ruth for. The context we are given is very slight but it seems that what we what we have here is not just a plan of Naomi's but the gentle burgeoning of a love story that Naomi may simply be encouraging. Not one of wild romanticism but of a deep and growing mutual respect and magnetism towards each other that started during the harvest gleaning.

And finally of course Boaz is a guardian redeemer for Naomi's family of which Ruth has become a part. This is explained in Chapter 4, so hopefully you will be here for next week's sermon, but this was part of the customary protections for the weak, like the Jubilee. This is where we also see the second and larger love story at work, one that points us towards Jesus, our redeemer. Boaz offers protection to Naomi and Ruth, he provides for them but he never takes advantage of them although they are weak and it would be easy for him to do so. He gently waits until Ruth comes to him and shows her utter trust in him

and then he responds by welcoming her into the closest of relationships. Where have we heard all that before?

Matthew gives a genealogy of Jesus and conventionally this would only include the male line. Matthew however breaks this convention by including a small number of women who, apart from Mary, all seem to be outsiders or misfits. Boaz is himself part of that genealogy and though her marriage to him Ruth who was a foreigner, a Moabite and a refugee comes to be named in it too.

We often see the Old Testament as exclusively the story of God's chosen people, the Israelites. But when we think of God's love in the context of Ruth what stands out is his love for the weak and his desire to protect them regardless of nationality, status, wealth or the compromises their circumstances may have forced them to make. There are 65m displaced people in the world today, more than at any other time in history. Quite a few of those who reach the UK are just over the moor from us in Bradford. Its another world to me and I suspect many of us but because Penny my wife works as a GP in a Bradford practice that primarily treats refugees, I get to hear something of the suffering they have undergone. Many of the patients have been tortured or lost relatives and the practice needs to cover nearly 70 different languages. Our Church and many people in it respond to needs of this kind and Ruth shows us that its important that we do so. Its great that our Church is hosting a day for refugee families from Bradford on 28th September. We are reminded that the Jews were repeatedly themselves refugees and not just in the exodus from Egypt. In our other reading Jeremiah tells the Jews in exile in Babylon that they should wait patiently on his plans for their return, prosperity and blessing. Naomi had given up in bitterness but recovered the power of hope and was able to make her own plans when she saw that God did indeed love and bless her. Ruth was always steadfast in seeking to look after Naomi and herself found blessing, love and protection.

As I said at the start among us here today will be many different love stories, each of them unique. But we, Ruth and Naomi are also all part of the same great love story – our relationship with God through Jesus Christ – and that should give us hope.

