

Ruth 2

In the book of Ruth we meet with two women who had fallen on hard times.

Naomi was the elder of the two. She was from the town of Bethlehem, of the tribe of Judah in Israel but had left during a famine, with her family, to live in a foreign place – Moab. Whilst there tragedy struck, her husband died, we then learn that her two sons married Moabite women and she was provided for, but then further tragedy strikes and both son also die, without leaving an heir. We now have three widows – Naomi and her daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah.

Naomi had lost virtually everything – in leaving Israel her husband had probably sold their land – she had lost her inheritance as part of God's people and without a male heir, again, she would have felt cut adrift from God's promises of blessing, cut adrift from his purposes for his people.

Nevertheless she decides to return from Moab to Bethlehem – and she admits she is bitter, emotionally broken by life's afflictions, she admits she feels empty, believes she is empty and has nothing left – perhaps a little distorted thinking as she overlooks the kindness of a faithful daughter-in-law – Ruth.

Ruth was a Moabite – she had been married to one of Naomi's sons and was now a widow. Faced with the choice of making a new life amongst her own people or accompanying her mother-in-law to Bethlehem, a foreign town, she chose the latter and in doing so declares a decisive break with Moab's idols and an attachment to Naomi's / Israel's God – a faithfulness to Naomi such that she is willing to endure a change of culture and to risk being looked down upon, scorned as a foreigner.

Two women – in many ways different – different generations, different culture, different spiritual experience – but united by a common tragedy and grief, united in facing up to a common dilemma – poverty and destitution and all the vulnerability that widows have in such situations – united as well by a certain faith – that the best option was to go to Bethlehem – an expression of hope that just maybe God would do something about their predicament.

They had placed their trust in God – perhaps a fragile, even bitter trust – but trust all the same – question – would God prove himself to be trustworthy? And how? Chapter two begins to answer these questions – with a resounding yes that just gets amplified throughout chapters three and four.

You may feel that life has treated you badly – feel weighed down by afflictions, suffering the pain of loss or the consequences of ill judged decisions. You may be more or less a stranger to church life, maybe you feel new to all that the Bible teaches – but you've heard that God is supposed to be good and kind, you believe that trusting God is the right and best thing to do – but will he prove himself to be trustworthy? And how? As you tentatively reach out to take the hand of God – what can you expect?

I trust that Ruth 2 will give you some idea – then Ruth 3 & 4 will tell you more, but that will be for another day.

The Narrative:

Each chapter in Ruth characterised by a structure involving a going out and a coming back:

Chapter 1 – Naomi goes out to Moab (full) and comes back (empty) – big timescale – a couple of decades (?)

Chapter 2 – Ruth (timescale of 1 day) Ruth goes out empty but comes back full – by this simple narrative structure – striking that God is turning the situation around. Ruth and Naomi may have started the day wondering if, when and what they would eat – by the end of the day they have ample and probably enough provisions for several days – an ephah = 22 litres of grain!

(chapters 3 & 4 equally characterised by a going out and a coming back – narrative progresses to Ruth and Naomi becoming more and more abundantly provided for.)

So, Ruth left in the morning poor and wondering perhaps where the next meal would come from. She returns in the evening weighed down with enough grain to fill the larder.

The questions – Can God be trusted? Or, have we made the right decision in turning to God's land, his people, to God himself? These questions begin to be answered – yes! God is trustworthy – he's begun to prove it. Yes we were right to turn back to God.

How does God prove he is trustworthy to the widow and the foreigner? To all who feel afflicted or vulnerable?

Three lessons – I will major on the last:

a) Providence.

The fact that Ruth ended up in Boaz's field is to be understood in terms of God's providence – the sovereign outworking of his kind and gracious intentions towards Naomi and Ruth.

Whilst it is not explicitly mentioned in the text that God did this; the phrasing is certainly suggestive that we are supposed to read this between the lines. "As it turned out .." or "It just so happened ...". Any reader of a Jewish mindset would understand this kind of language as speaking of God's providence, his behind the scenes personal involvement in turning events in our favour.

And then in verse 20 Naomi's exclamation of praise and thanksgiving certainly reveals that she believed that this was no chance encounter but that God had been in control, working out his sovereign and kind purposes.

Chance and coincidence are not really Biblical concepts – God is able to control events in such a way as his good intentions and purposes are accomplished without overriding our choices and freedom – this remains a mystery and it's not my intention to try to elucidate this mystery this morning.

Learning to recognise God's providence and to trust it is no easy thing. But at this key, critical moment in Naomi and Ruth's lives God arranged an encounter that would change the course of their lives for the better and give them more than they would ever have dreamed of.

Worth noting as well that this idea of providence is not just valid, at work for the big important people of the Bible, it doesn't just work for the lives of guys like Moses or David or Paul. No! Ruth and Naomi were ordinary folk and they benefitted from God's providence – we too may see ourselves as ordinary, but in God's eyes we are individuals and his can work things in our favour in a very personal way.

b) Welfare provision.

We need to understand that legal welfare provision was enshrined in Israel's law under Moses. One aspect of this law is immediately relevant (I will leave those relating to the kinsman redeemer to the person teaching on Ruth 3).

Read Leviticus 19: 9-10 (repeated verbatim 23:22 + Deut 24:19)

So – those who were destitute and vulnerable had the right to go into fields where the harvest had taken place and to pick up grain that had inadvertently been missed or left behind. In this way they should find enough to eat – basic needs were provided for. This legal provision is specifically made out for widows, orphans and foreigners. So Naomi qualified under one count and Ruth under two.

I don't know whether other ancient countries had similar laws – maybe Naomi returned to Bethlehem knowing she could avail herself of this right – a big unknown. But important lesson – Israel's legal code allowed for or bestowed basic welfare provision, and not only for its own people but also for foreigners!

What can we learn?

God revealed these laws to Moses. So, these laws reflect God's nature and character – we must conclude then that God has a heart, a concern for people who find themselves in economically precarious positions – so God is by nature a compassionate God, a kind God, an understanding God, and a loving God.

These laws also reflect that the heart and purposed of God go beyond his own people. He doesn't limit his compassion to those of Israelite descent; his care is for the outsider as well as the insider.

If you are hesitatingly placing your trust in God, these laws and their application in Ruth 2 show you what kind of God you are coming to – he's the kind of God that tells nations / his people, to take care of the poor – because he himself has compassion for the poor, he's the kind of God who wants his people to open their hearts to the outsiders, the foreigners – he is not a parochial or introspective God but rather an openhearted and welcoming one..

People become poor and vulnerable for all kinds of reasons, sometimes because of ill judged decision making, sometimes for reasons beyond their control – whatever – it is part of God's will and heart that people have their basic needs provided for and he wants society to organise itself to meet those needs.

Now, at this point we could get political – at this time of austerity the British welfare state is facing reform and maybe some elements are under threat. There is also a growing undercurrent of bad feeling towards about immigration and foreigners.

Such issues need to be debated in a mature way and now is not the time to do this, except to say that any Christian involvement in such a debate must reflect biblical or Godlike values.

Core value = compassion for the needy and vulnerable – how that care and provision is organised at a practical level by society and or churches is up for discussion – the way it is done various form country to country, from culture to culture, from generation to generation – but bottom line = in a world where so much has gone so wrong and where people find themselves for whatever reason in crisis situations, God desires that their essential needs be met. That is the God in whom we place our trust.

c) A kind person.

God not only provided Ruth and Naomi a society where welfare provision was enshrined in the law but he also provided them with a kind person, a generous benefactor in the man Boaz.

It is one thing to respect the law but this man goes way beyond that – he does much more than the law requires, much more that would normally be expected.

It is interesting that the events of Ruth occurred during the period of Israel's history described in the book of Judges – where we learn that “everyone did as he saw fit” usually interpreted as a damning indictment of everyone living for himself.

Period of Judges characterised by periods when people didn't really respect or apply the law as they should – however, we shouldn't be taken in by blanket generalisations – some were different – at least one was different – Boaz.

God provided Ruth and Naomi with an upright and law respecting man, but a man who went beyond his usual civic duty – how?

The Law teaches “Love your neighbour” – now Naomi would have been considered a neighbour – but it wasn't Naomi who went into the fields – it was Ruth and she was Moabitess – the Moabites historically were seen as enemies.

So, Boaz goes beyond loving a neighbour - he loves an enemy! Part of loving an enemy is not treating someone from a foreign community according to prejudices and stereotypes – Boaz didn't – he'd heard of Ruth's kindness towards Naomi and receives her on that basis rather than rejecting her because of historic animosity between these two peoples.

So God provided a person who was willing to relate to Ruth as she was, where she was at, and not on the basis of prejudice or stereotypes.

Now, Boaz learnt that Ruth had been gleaning in his fields – as a landowner, estate manager he could have just thought that's Ok and taken no further interest – he could also have thought, that's a bit of a nuisance and taken measure to discourage Ruth, but no, again Boaz goes way beyond what would normally be expected, beyond what the law requires. How?

He makes sure that Ruth stays safe – he tells her to stay in his fields and tells his own men to watch out how they behave with her. Women in Ruth's position would have been very vulnerable – a target for unscrupulous, exploitative and lustful men. This remains a big problem throughout the world today – but not all men are the same – Boaz wasn't and he made sure that Ruth remained safe, he protected her from potential harm.

Then we learn that Boaz allows Ruth to eat at the same table as the other workers and to drink from the same water jars. Again there was no legal obligation to do this. This was an act of kindness from a godly man who was concerned for Ruth's well being. Gleaning was hot and tiring work. Ruth would have need rest and food and water – Boaz was sensitive to her needs and gladly provided for them.

But there's more. Boaz tells his workers to deliberately leave ears of barley lying around that could be easily picked up by Ruth. At the end of the day Ruth goes home with an ephah of grain, that's 22 litres, as I said earlier and was according to commentators an extremely good days gleaning, as Naomi's exclamation of surprise and thanksgiving reveal. Boaz had given generously for Ruth and Naomi.

God had provided Ruth and Naomi with a good and kind man who took their welfare to heart. God, in this way proved himself to be trustworthy. But there's even more, we learn at the end of the chapter that Boaz was a kinsman redeemer of Naomi and thus of Ruth. What's a kinsman redeemer I here you ask – well you'll have to come back next time to find out – suffice to say that Boaz role didn't stop with just providing rich pickings in grain – he was going to do an awful lot more for Ruth and Naomi. In Boaz God would provide not only ongoing material needs but an awful lot besides.

In Boaz, God had proved himself to be trustworthy.

Where is Boaz today? You may ask. Who has God given for me, so proving that he is trustworthy?

I want to suggest that God has provided someone even better than Boaz, someone even kinder than Boaz, someone more generous than Boaz, more self-sacrificial than Boaz, more merciful than Boaz. And in fact he's a descendant of Boaz.

God has provided, given Jesus.

Any reading of the four gospels will reveal that Jesus demonstrated a compassion, love and mercy that set himself apart from his contemporaries, that surpassed the kind of love that people were used to seeing – even better than that of Boaz.

Examples in the gospels of Jesus showing compassion to people who were vulnerable, treated as outcasts, those who were marginalised or looked down upon. Jesus showed compassion to lepers and others afflicted with serious sickness and disability. Jesus showed compassion to the bereaved, the widow and orphan. Jesus showed compassion to those who had messed up their lives through ill judged decisions and destructive behaviours – be it the prostitute, those caught up in adultery, or the corrupt tax collector, and even those entrapped within a legalistic and judgemental religious system.

Jesus showed compassion to a diverse range of people: rich and poor, the religious and the irreligious, men and women, Jew and gentile, the insider and the outsider, neighbour and enemy.

Jesus was not only a man of compassion. Just as Boaz was a kinsman redeemer, Jesus was and remains a redeemer – I'll leave this to be explained in the next sermon in the series – suffice it to say that a redeemer is someone who rescues a person from a desperate situation, and impossible predicament, someone who is ready to pay the price, make the sacrifice necessary to enact this rescue, someone who will do all it takes to restore a person to the realm of God's promise.

Boaz was a kind and compassionate man – but just a shadow of the kindness and compassion we find in Jesus. Boaz we'll learn was a redeemer, again a shadow of the true redemption we find in Jesus.

My friends you can place your trust wholly in Jesus because in him God has given you a kind and compassionate redeemer, rescuer or saviour.

You might ask though – how do I meet this Jesus? Where do I find his kindness?

This is where, there is a bit of a challenge to rise up to?

Jesus is alive and reigning in the heavenly realms – how does he express his kindness? I would suggest he will do it through Spirit-filled believers who will be just as distinct from our world as Boaz may have been from his contemporaries.

People will meet the kindness and compassion of Christ as they meet kindness and compassion in Christian believers. When we rise up to the challenge, responsibility or calling even, of being kind and compassionate in a distinctively biblical or godly way, then God will use us, he will give us to people in need in order to help them discover that God can be trusted and that with him, through the church a new and more hopeful life can be built.

Inasmuch as the book of Ruth portrays Boaz to be a kind of ideal or exemplary Israelite, we can see something of what the ideal Christian should look like. To the extent that Boaz was to a fine degree Christlike, not even having known Christ, we can learn from his example and aspire to be like him.

What sort of kindness might help people to see God as kind and trust in him? What can we learn about kindness from Boaz?

- Kindness disregards and overlooks prejudices and stereotypes to meet people where they are at on the basis of their common humanity.
- Kindness provides safe rather than exploitative or abusive relationships for needy and vulnerable people.
- Kindness helps people in practical ways beyond what would normally be legally or socially expected – it surprises by its level of generosity.

Conclusion:

Ruth 2:

- Invites us to trust in God and gives us good reason to believe he will be kind and faithful to us.
- Sends us out to prove to others that God is trustworthy as they meet his kindness in the example of our everyday lives.