

Sermon 9th August 2009 (Ruth 4) “The man who redeems”

We’re on our fourth and final chapter of the Book of Ruth this morning.

I think we’ve enjoyed this, I know I have.

And now, we reach the happily-ever-after ending.

They get married, they have a baby, God blesses them, and that’s great.

But first, we’ve got this strange bit in 4:1-12, where Boaz sits down with a bunch of guys at the town gate, and it seems that whoever ends up with the sandal when the music stops gets the girl.

Fantastic. Do you want to get married to the woman you love?

All you need is a lawyer and a sandal. Forget the ring, the kilts and confetti, just get a sandal guys!

And now you are all wondering where I’m going to go with this.

Well, first, let’s go back, and remind ourselves of the story so far.

It began in Bethlehem, with a famine.

Bethlehem means the house of Bread – but there’s no bread in Bethlehem.

Possibly because of the sin of his people, God withholds his blessing from them.

And a man called Elimelech makes a decision – a stupid decision.

He takes his family out of the Promised Land, so he can find work in Moab.

It makes good economic sense, but it is spiritual folly.

He is taking his family away from the believing people of Israel into a godless place where there is no Church, there is no fellowship, a place where the people are sexually immoral and worship not the God of the Bible, but Chemoch the fish-god.

And that’s where he wants his wife to be, and his children to grow up.

This is a man whose name means “My God is King” – but who in reality makes decisions for his family without regard to God. He’s a fool.

And it is a disaster.

In Moab he dies – and his sons die – and his wife Naomi is left with nothing.

And so, the Book of Ruth begins with three funerals,

and three women left in destitution and poverty,

and Naomi sitting in the dust saying

“I am empty and bitter – God hates me.”

Now, we *will* go from three funerals and dead family at the start

to a wedding and a blessing, and growing family at the end,

and that is the providence of God:

his amazing plan of blessing,

which takes hopeless things and hopeless people

and does the most amazing things with their lives.

But, the providence of God is a strange thing.

First of all, the providence of God is often like a Rutherglen bus.

You know the type of bus.

You know where to get it – the journey starts at the bus stop down the road.

And you know where it’s going – because it says “St Enochs” or “Springburn” or “East Kilbride” on the front.

But you just know that between here and there, it is just bound to go to some amazing places that you would neither expect nor comprehend.
You'll be treated to a tour of Toryglen, Bridgeton or Govan – it's all a big adventure, a mystery tour.

God does not always take us in straight lines.
He likes to take us on detours in order to teach us lessons.

The shortest route between Egypt and the Promised Land does not involve a trip to Sinai, and it certainly doesn't take 40 years of wilderness wandering.
But that was God's time and God's journey for Moses and the Israelites.

Second, the providence of God is always an invitation to actively trust.
That is, God invites us to be involved in his plan by taking steps of faith.
He alone is the saviour – but we are invited to work out that salvation in our faith and obedience.

Ruth took two massive steps of faith.

Firstly she made a decision to leave Moab and its godless people and to commit her life to the God of Israel and to his people – to Naomi's people.

It was a huge leap of faith:

Naomi had nothing to offer - nothing but a share in her poverty.

And the second step of faith was that when they got to Bethlehem, Ruth decided to go into the field and look for food.

It was dangerous – a woman alone,

but Ruth trusted that if God had brought her this far, then God would look after her.

And that's what God did,

as she trusted his providence, he faithfully provided what she asked for, and so much more.

She happened to go out into the field.

She happened to pick a random field, and

it happened to belong to a rich man;

he happened to be a godly man;

he happened to be single;

and he happened to be passing by that day.

That's the providence of God.

And so, Boaz meets Ruth and Boaz prays for Ruth

“may God provide for you, and take you under his wing”

and in God's providence, Boaz is the answer to his own prayer.

He becomes God's agent of protection and provision.

And there, the story could have ended.

Godly girl meets Christian guy, and everyone lives happily ever after – here come the babies.

But God's providential bus then takes a detour.

Boaz misses the signs.

Typical guy, he doesn't get Ruth's body language.

He doesn't make a move. He doesn't call.

He can't imagine she's interested in him.

And so Naomi decides to give the bus a push.

“Ruth, you need to send out some signs that even this man can't miss!”

“Wash, nice dress, make up, perfume

go to the party, wait till he's had a drink, lie down beside him and *trust* me, then he'll get the message."

This is the Naomi dating plan.
(And, as I said last week, girls don't try this at home.)

Now Ruth does what Naomi says.
And when Boaz discovers her beside him, she spells it out
"spread your cloak, over your servant"

Boaz would have understood, that that's not an invitation for a quick snog, because, in Ezekiel (16:8), God said that Israel was naked and he spread his cloak (or his wing, it's the same Hebrew word) over her, and became her protector and her husband.

Indeed Boaz had prayed for Ruth, that God would spread his wing over her.
Now Ruth says to Boaz, I want you to spread your wing (or cloak) over me.

So, Boaz finally gets the message.
And, he's delighted – "thank you Lord" and he says to Ruth:
"you truly are a godly woman, and I really want to marry you, but..."

And here, the bus of providence is off on a detour yet again.

But, there's another guy....

There's another guy who is first in line to marry Ruth.
Someone else has the legal and cultural right to marry her and provide for her.

And so, just as we think God's plan is finally about to happen, there's an obstacle.

Well, I suppose, Boaz could have gone away crying and saying:
"I thought this was God's plan
I wanted this to be God's plan,
but it didn't work out, so it wasn't meant to be."

But, if the girl is worth marrying, then the obstacle is worth surmounting.

Most of us who are married, overcame obstacle to get there. Didn't we?

Maybe it was distance, maybe it was family disapproval, maybe it was age, and maybe it was another guy (which is fine, as long as he wasn't her husband.)

With Elaine and me it was money.
I was a divinity student, and was going to be for a while, she had a low trainee's salary, and we almost despaired of affording a house, that wasn't falling down.
But we wanted to be married, and so we overcame the obstacle.

But anywhere in life that God is leading you there will be obstacles.
Now, sometimes the obstacles are God's way of saying "this is the wrong way – turn back", but other times, they are tests.
God is saying, this *is* my will, this *is* where I'm taking you, *but* you need to work at it, you need to learn patience, and you need to learn to trust me.

Obstacles appear on the bus route of God's providence.

They did for Ruth and Boaz, and in chapter 4, he begins to work round the obstacle.

I want to make no apologies here for specifically addressing the men.

Because, if God's blessing is to come on a family then sometimes a godly man has to step up ... and be a man.

Now I don't think I'm being sexist here.
Everyone has a part to play in the plan of God.
And this book is largely about the part of godly women.

Ruth, steps out in the most remarkable way,
and with incredible bravery and loyalty chooses to trust God and let him turn her life
around.

Naomi, who's had the hardest life imaginable, full of suffering, turns her bitterness to
hope and is willing to give providence a shove.

These are great role models for godly women.

But, we also need role models that are specifically for men.

Indeed, we've spent a generation or more in society and in Church developing
woman's liberation, and as the father of two daughters, I celebrate that.

But we now need to face the fact that the men are leaving the church – and seeing
faith and Church as something that's for women.

We are blessed by good women teaching discoverers, doing holiday clubs, and
bringing their children to church.

Thank you ladies, for doing that.

But where are the Christian men who will be role models for the boys?

We need to model what it means to be godly and to be a man.

A man who prays;

a man who steps up to his responsibilities;

and a man who, at the appropriate time, is willing to step up and do the business.

And so, I give you Boaz.

His name means "strength".

(If you're picturing the six-pack already, but that's not the strength we mean.)

What have we learned about him?

He's a successful business leader.

He's got godly, biblical, ethics in his workplace.

He prays God's blessing for his employees.

He's sensitive to people's needs.

He has integrity and chastity in his sexual relationships.

He's a man who wants to provide and protect.

He's a man whose life is marked out by prayer.

He prayed God's blessing on Ruth (chapter 2) even before there was any romance.

He's a real godly man.

And now, in Chapter 4, he steps up to deal with the obstacle: the other guy.

See, here's how it works.

God's law gave his people a very strong sense of family responsibility.

If a man died, his next of kin had a responsibility to his family;

a responsibility to protect them and look after them;

a responsibility to make sure that their land stayed in the family;

a responsibility to make sure that the memory and legacy of the dead man was not
forgotten.

Now, Boaz is more than willing to meet all those obligations:
to marry Ruth and give Naomi grandchildren.

But this it is not his job, and not his right.
That responsibility belongs to someone else...
the other guy.

Now, interestingly, the other guy has no name in the Bible.
The Scripture goes out of its way to forget his name.
It doesn't matter who he is, because he's a loser.
He's not a real man.
He's just a "Mr. What's-his-face."

Boaz meets him, and even though he's a family member who lives in Bethlehem,
even Boaz can't remember his name.
He says "em...friend, sit here".
We'd say "come here, pall" – to avoid using the name of a man so insignificant we
don't remember what he's called.

The guy is a loser because he's a man who has utterly shirked his responsibilities.

He's Naomi's next of kin, he lives nearby.
Naomi returned to town and there was a big commotion,
– but where was Mr. What's-his-face?
His family members were widows, destitute, broke and starving:
Ruth was reduced to begging in the fields,
– but where was Mr. What's-his-face?

Nowhere.

So, Boaz goes into town, to sort it out on Ruth's behalf.
And, the Bible tells us that Mr What's-his-face "happened" to pass by.
This is providence again.

Boaz sits him down.
Boaz calls over the witnesses – we're going to make this legal.
The man's going to do business.

"O.K." he says
"Remember Naomi, Elimelech's widow?
She's so destitute, she's selling her land.
This might be news to you, but you have the right to redeem it:
to buy it and keep it in the family.
Do you want to do that? Because if you won't, I will?"

And the man says "Property, yes, I'll take that. I like property. It's a good deal."

Now, Boaz could have despaired at this point: "Oh no, I'm going to lose Ruth!"

But he's a man, and he's got his God-given wits about him.

"Ok, he says.
But with this family opportunity comes family responsibilities.
You become responsible for Naomi.
You become responsible for Ruth.
You'll need to marry her, and have children with her, so that those children can
maintain the line and inheritance of Elimelech.
That would be your religious, legal and social duty to the family."

Now Mr. What's-his-face loses interest.

"That's no deal. I have children, I don't need more babies to compete for my
inheritance, and suck up my money.

An extra wife, who's a Moabite, a bitter old mother-in-law, and some more babies is

not what I want.
I can't take on those responsibilities.
You do it."

Boaz, says "Ok then"
Let's seal the deal
We've got the witnesses here, let's do the strange legal thing with the sandal and
make it official."
And the man does the deal.

You see, there are three types of men here:

There are men like Elimelech.
And those men are fools.
They make decisions without regard to the consequences.
They don't consider the spiritual welfare of their wives and children.
And they leave a disaster for others to pick up.

You want to be a good parent – make sure you provide spiritually for your family, and
not just materially.

Make sure they have godly people around them.
Make sure that their spiritual wellbeing and influence is not less important than their
education or material provision.

Kids *need* to know God, but they don't actually need play stations, swimming lessons,
or even the best exam results.

Elimelech didn't get that, because Elimelech was a fool.

Then, there are men like Mr. What's-his-face:
men that shirk their responsibilities,
irresponsible, self-centred, and undependable.

Then there are men like Boaz.

Boaz is not only a godly man who's got it together.
He's also described as a redeemer.
That means he's a man who picks up after the mess of others.

He will sort out the mess that Elimelech left, as he will provide materially and
spiritually for Naomi and Ruth.

He will pick up on the responsibilities shirked by Mr. What's-his-face.

He's involved in what the New Testament will call "the ministry of reconciliation":
a ministry of healing things that are broken;
a ministry of providing for the destitute;
and of working to make society a better place for all, but particularly for the most
vulnerable.

And that's being a man, although it is a role that all Christians are called into.
We are called to be redeemers.

And, of course, the ultimate redeemer, the ultimate man, is Jesus.

We've said already in this series of sermons, that C.H. Spurgeon said that Jesus was
"our glorious Boaz".

We are like Ruth.
We are foreigners without rights.
We are poor, we are helpless, we are spiritually destitute,
and he comes and provides for us.

He redeems us.
He makes us his.
The Bible even says he is like our husband: our ideal husband.

And like Boaz, he has no responsibility to clean up our mess,
but he willingly
graciously
lovingly does it
paying the price of our redemption
and giving himself to us, that we might be his.

And because he is our redeemer, we are also called to be redeemers – to be healers.

And that's the story of Ruth
or maybe better, if I'm putting on my male hat,
the story of Ruth *and Boaz*.

Is a story that teaches us about God's providence:
God providing blessing, if only we will trust him.

It is also a story that invites us to step *out* with Ruth and to step *up* with Boaz.

To step out in faith – bravely trusting God – and looking for his hand of providence.

And, to step up to our responsibilities.

To be those who pray God's blessing for others
– that he will bless them, redeem them and protect them –
but then to be willing to step up to our calling to be the answer to our prayers for
them, to be Christ in their situation.

There will be hard times
There will be suffering
There will be obstacles

But in the end, we can trust because we have the greatest redeemer – Jesus Christ: our
glorious Boaz.

Amen