

Sermon 26th July (Ruth 2) “Living in God’s providence”

“The Lord be with you”
(Are you getting this responding thing?)

We are on Ruth chapter 2 this morning, so for those away last week (or just asleep) let me summarise where we got to with chapter one.

(Although you can now download the sermon from www.stonelawchurch)

There was a famine in Bethlehem.

Now, Bethlehem means “the house of bread”, so God, who is the one who gives all good things, was, in his judgement withholding bread from the house of bread.

And a man called Elimelech, without any reference to God, came up with the bright idea of taking his family out of the promised land and into the pagan land of Moab.

An economically practical decision, but spiritually disastrous.

And his name Elimelech meant, “my God is King”

– but, actually, he was trusting only in his own ingenuity.

And it didn’t work out well: he died in Moab, and so did his two sons.

And so, ten years after they left, his wife Naomi returned to Bethlehem, a bitter, broken woman, full of anger.

But remarkably, with her went her daughter-in-law, Ruth.

Ruth, a Moabite, a former pagan, a widow

made a beautiful decision to go with her mother-in-law

to set out and trust the God of Israel

to leave behind one pagan way of life and start a new life with the people of God.

1:16 “Your people shall be my people and your God my God”

She’s a new believer – a convert.

And we left the story with hope,

they returned to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

God was blessing his people again.

But just because there is plenty in Bethlehem, did not mean that these two destitute, homeless, widows would be ok.

In many wealthy societies the poor are ignored.

Trickle-down economics doesn’t always work,

and a bitter old widow and a foreign immigrant are right at the bottom of the heap.

And so Ruth and Naomi begin to chat.

Remember, half the text of the book of Ruth is chatter,

(which is perhaps not surprising given that the principle characters are woman.)

Ruth says, “we’re broke, we’re hungry, let me go and glean”,

and verse two she says “maybe behind someone in whose sight I might find favour” – maybe someone will be good to me.

This is remarkable. Ruth takes action – but she also trusts

“I will go out and look for food”

“I could get exploited”

“I could get raped”

“but I trust, that the God who brought me from Moab, will lead me to someone who will be good to me.”

Now, she really is stepping out and trusting in God’s providence.

A word about gleaning.

Gleaning is the Hebrew equivalent of welfare

God says, “the land is mine, and I give it to you”

“but when you harvest the field, leave some unharvested for the poor and needy – so that they can come behind the harvesters and work and eat.”

(Leviticus 19:9-10)

The principle is: if you want God’s blessing in your industry

do not push the land to the maximum to the detriment of the poor.

Don’t maximise your profits at the expense of the most vulnerable.

If you do, if you exploit the resources I give you regardless

if you maximise profit and bonuses over everything else

then, in the end, I will not bless your prosperity.

Wow.

Who’d have thought Leviticus could have foretold the credit crunch?

Maybe not so dry and irrelevant after all?

Anyway, back to the topic.

2:1 introduces Boaz – he’s our hero

He’s got a cool name, it means “strength”.

Indeed when his descent King Solomon was building the temple years later, he called one of the two great pillars “Boaz” after his great-great-great-great-grandfather.

Now, Boaz, he’s a successful businessman, he’s respected by his workers, he’s righteous, he’s god-fearing, he’s sensitive, he’s protective and he’s single.

Boaz is the man.

And the Bible is brilliant here.

It tells us that Ruth goes out to glean

she’s hungry, she’s vulnerable, she’s in a strange, dangerous, land, but she’s trusting God.

And as she goes out to glean – verse 3

and “*as it happened* she came to the part of the field belonging to Boaz”

Now, let’s get this straight.

She just happens to come Bethlehem

She just happens to be hungry

She just happens to come to the fields

She just happens to randomly pick a field

and it just so happens that it belongs to a rich man

and it just happens that he loves God

and he just happens to be single

Wow. I think the Bible is being ironic here.

This isn’t karma, not fortune, not luck, this isn’t her stars, this is not happenstance, circumstance, coincidence:

this is providence.

And that’s the theme of the book of Ruth – God’s providence

even without miracles, burning bushes, angels or booming voices

God is at work – bringing things together for good.

And providence is everywhere

God provides, God brings things to pass

we just have to learn to open our eyes and look for it.

A fortuitous meeting
a “chance” conversation
A phone call from a friend that comes just when we need it
Luck? Chance?
Or do we see the hand of God on our lives?
The more we trust, the more we look, the more these things just “seem to happen”.
V.4 lucky Ruth is in the field that just happens to belong to the man who just happens
to be rich, godly and single
and it just happens that Boaz decides to visit his field that day.

Providence.
(Cupid doesn’t have a look in here. The Lord God is the supreme matchmaker,
bringing this godly couple together)

Now, the boss walks only the shop floor
How does your boss greet you?
Boaz says “The Lord be with you” and his staff say “The Lord bless you”

It is a prayer and response. It’s liturgy.
Indeed he his quoting the Bible
This is the Aaronic blessing from Numbers 6:24.

“The Lord bless you and keep you
the Lord be gracious unto you
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.”

How many bosses take liturgy and scripture into the workplace
and begin the day by asking God to bless the employees?

As I say, Boaz is the man.
Guys you want to work for him, ladies you want to have his kids.

But what happens if we take Scripture and prayer to the workplace?
Or indeed into any place outside the church?

At 8.30 in the morning,
on Oxford Street in London
in Starbucks over a latte
in June this year
I sat with four friends and we read this passage together.

Why?
Well, because when you read the Bible in Church, you ask “what does it say to the
Church?”
But we wanted to open it where people were working, shopping, and doing business,
and begin to ask, “how does a Biblical worldview speak to this – to a secular world?”
What happens when we take Bible and prayer, and God’s blessing into the everyday.
Well, it begins to change things.

It did for Boaz.

Boaz takes liturgy into the field.
He takes Bible verses into the workplace:
prayer for his employees as his working practice.
And look what happens
God’s care for the poor is upheld in that workplace
Women are respected and not exploited.

Ruth is safe – they have a sexual harassment policy
profits are not maximised at the expense of justice for the needy.

And all that is happening even before Boaz shows up
because his workforce understands that Godly values are practiced in this place.
There is a spiritual business ethic.

If you pray before you work – it changes how you work
when you meet people, when you make decisions, you begin to look for God's
blessings and God providence.

That's why we begin church meetings with prayer.
Because then we look for God.

So, if you are on the Meeting Place team
pray before you start
or simply say "the Lord be with us"
and then be open to what God will do – the encounters that "happen" that day:
because you've turned this time and this place into a place where God is expected.

How about family decisions being taken with prayer?
Praying before we go to the office – or better still, in the office
How about us greeting each other with "the Lord be with you"?
Because it changes the encounter.

People used to do it.
Did you know that Goodbye is a corruption of "God be with you"?

Anyway back to the story.

Boaz, the man, arrives
prays God's blessing on his workers
and then asks "who's that? She's not on the payroll?"
And the foreman says "that's the Moabite, with the crazy mother-in-law
and gosh, she is a hard worker"

Boaz (v8) speaks to Ruth for the first time. The romance begins.
He says "Stay here, reap here, be safe here"
"enjoy the company of my workers - I know you don't know anyone"
"there is Godly fellowship here"
"let them provide water for you"
He's looking after her.
She's safe in his Godly workplace.

Ruth, bows to the ground, and thanks him and then she asks:
"Why have I found favour in your sight, that you should take notice of me when I am
a foreigner?"

She is a very wise girl,
she doesn't just go "Oh Boaz, you're my hero", she questions:
"This is fantastic, you seem an answer to my prayers – but what is your motive?"

It is a really good question.

Ruth is poor, she's dirty from hard work, she has nothing
she's a foreigner, she's a pagan background, she's not a virgin
she's digging in the trash to feed herself and a this crazy mother in law
She's not exactly looking like the girl of Boaz's dreams.

So, what is his motive? What's he got in mind? What's he after? Is it sex?

V11 he replies

“your character and reputation proceed you.

I know that you are godly and loyal and hardworking

I know that you risked everything, left Moab and trusted the Lord
and I respect that. I respect you.”

What a reply.

That has to be the way to win a woman’s heart.

Boaz, he’s the man.

And then, look what he does, (v.12) he prays for her.

“May the Lord reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the
Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge”

Here is real Christian spirituality.

Here is a man who does liturgy and prayers in the everyday in the field

God’s values in the workplace

God’s blessing on his workers

and now spontaneously praying God’s providence and blessing on the people he
meets.

But what is his prayer?

He prays that God might reward her, protect her, and give her all she needs?

And what does she need?

She needs safety, she needs food, she needs water, she needs protection, and
ultimately, in that culture, she needs a husband and she needs children.

And who is going to give her all those things?

Boaz is. They will make babies together.

God’s providence will come to Ruth through Boaz.

And so Boaz will be the answer to his own prayer.

That’s God’s providence.

And prayer is like that.

Sometimes prayer moves God to act, and sometimes prayer moves the person who is
prayer to be the instrument of God’s providence.

Prayer and action often go together.

It isn’t much use if I prayer “Lord, feed my kids”

if I’m not willing to get a job, and put food on the table.

It was God who put *me* there to bless my children with all they need
that’s God’s providence.

I can’t pray “Lord, lead my friend to faith”

if I’m not willing to speak to him about the gospel

if I’m not open to being the answer to my prayer.

I can’t pray “Lord, comfort Mrs Jones in the lost of her husband”

if I’m not willing to lift the phone and ask how she is

Providence is the good God working his blessings out for people
but I have a duty and a responsibility, indeed a privilege in being part of that blessing..

I should always be alert for the ways God might work through me to bless and
encourage other people.

If we say in the workplace, in the Meeting Place, in the home and in the field

“God bless you”

then we should be open to the ways God will use us to bless others – spiritually, emotionally, materially, physically.

There is a circle of grace and blessing here.

Because the Christian understands that we are like Ruth.

We come to God for protection, for blessing, for redemption for salvation.

And we come in our poverty.

We have nothing.

We are former pagans.

We are aliens with no rights.

But God blesses us in every way.

C.H. Spurgeon called Jesus Christ “our glorious Boaz”

Jesus is the one who takes us under his wing.

He’s the hero

He’s the saviour

He’s the redeemer

He’s the man

He feeds us and protects us – indeed the Bible says Jesus is like our husband.

But as we have received blessing from God:

whether spiritually, materially or whatever,

he invites to be like him in graciously pouring out that blessing to others.

That we might become part of his providence to them.

That we might be protectors and providers

encouragers and redeemers.

That we might be an answer to prayer, even as we pray God’s blessing on them.

And so, I say with meaning, and with openness to God’s blessing:

“the Lord be with you”

Amen