

Sermon 19th July (Ruth 1) “Bitterness and blessings”

I want to spend a number of weeks going through the book of Ruth.

But first, a confession, I don’t recall ever preaching on the book of Ruth.

Now, maybe it’s a guy thing.

Judges comes before it, and that’s exciting –stories of Samson, and Gideon and battles – and I’ve preached on that.

Samuel comes after it, Saul and David and powerful Kings (and battles) – and I’ve preached on that.

But Ruth?

It’s a bit of a domestic story – how two widows get by, then a romance story of Ruth and Boaz getting married, not so macho really.

I suppose they might call it “chick lit”!

Yet, actually, the story shows how God’s great plans for the nations and for kings and for history come through his involvement with ordinary lives – because the Book Ruth at the end that Ruth and Boaz are the ancestors of Jesse, and Jesse of David, and David of Jesus Christ.

The fate of nations rests with domestic questions.

Do couples raise godly children?

What are the fathers doing?

What are the mothers teaching?

And so the story of Ruth belongs with the story of Hannah, and the story of Mary as very very important “chick lit”.

So, let’s start with chapter one.

(Please follow it in your Bibles)

V.1: *“In days when the judges ruled”*

Here, the scene is set here – it is somewhere about 1200 BC

Moses and Joshua and gone – but there are no kings yet.

And the book of Judges describes the dark ages for Israel:

it is a godless time,

a time of rebellion and of wickedness,

God’s people are surrounded by pagan nations, and they continually forget God – and things go badly for them.

When we preached through Judges a while ago, we got very depressed.

“In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land”

God had promised that if the people were faithful, then he would provide for them: because rain and food and crops come from God.

They are his blessings.

And in the Old Testament, famine is a sign of God’s displeasure – God withholds his gifts – all is not well.

“and a certain man of Bethlehem went to live in the country of Moab, with his wife and his two sons”

There is a huge irony here,

because Bethlehem means “the house of bread”.

God withholds bread in the house of bread.

All is not well.

And that famine creates a crisis for this man.

And so he decides to move his family 50 miles east to the other side of the Jordan to the land of Moab – where there is work and there is food.

It seems like a sensible decision.

The man is looking after the interests of his family

Because, guys, we are supposed to be the bread-winners aren't we?

And so we can understand this man's decision to move to where there are better economic prospects, better job opportunities.

This is the type of sensible decision that the head of the house should be taking.

But he's missed something.

There must be more to decision-making than economics.

There is more to family welfare than paying the mortgage.

Because, what's he done?

He's taken his family out of the promised land,
away from the fellowship of God's people and into a pagan place.

There are no churches in Moab.

There is no Sunday School.

In Moab, they don't worship Yahweh the God of Israel, they worship Chemosh, the fish-god.

In that place, his wife will have no Christian fellowship.

There will be no godly peer-group for the kids.

What will shape their lives in Moab?

What type of women will they marry there?

They will not meet anyone who shares their faith.

It is a huge temptation as parents to focus only on the practical provision for kids: bread, food, standards of living, schools, educational opportunities – and neglect to think about the spiritual environment that will nurture them.

Where is the fellowship? Who are the friends?

Verse two says *"The name of the man was Elimelech"*

There's another irony.

Because, Elimelech means "My God is King"

And here is "Mr. My God is King"

running his own life

providing from his own resourcefulness

making practical decisions

and doing it without reference to God.

And his intention is to do this just for a while

verse one says literally that he intended to sojourn in Moab

but he got stuck there.

Verse two says *"they went into the country of Moab and remained there"*

Sometimes people do that.

They take practical decisions that are intended to be temporary.

"We can't come to church just now, because.."

"We have to pull back from fellowship, from evening service, from midweek, but just for a while.."

And then they get stuck.

Have you been there?

You've wandered off from Christian fellowship, and you can't seem to get back.

And what happens next.

v.3 – *Elimelech died*.

All his efforts were to avoid dying in the famine – but he dies in Moab instead.

Another tragic irony!

We aren't told why he dies – is this God's judgement, is it natural causes, old-age, a camel accident?

Bible says nothing – some things just happen and we don't know why.

But all his planning does no good.

He dies, and then his sons marry Moabite women.

That's not good.

They are marrying outside of God's people:
partnering with people who are not god-fearing -
but that's the legacy of Elimelech's choices.

And then, ten years later, the sons die.

All Elimelech's practical efforts to keep his family alive and well and healthy – and they are all dead.

We don't know why that happened.

But, so far, the tragedy is that God has not been brought into the picture at all.

People are trying to do their own thing, and make their own provision, and trust in their own decisions, and they are finding that they are not in control, and they cannot provide and protect themselves.

And here we are at the lowest point of the story.

Naomi.

She's buried her husband.

She's buried her children.

And she's in Moab.

There is no fellowship here.

There is no church.

There are no people to encourage her:

to pray with her

to cry with her.

This is black, and this is painful, and this is life.

Now, we have had five verses of disaster,
and you wonder how much worse can this get?

But this is actually where the bad news ends.

Because the rest of this book is about how, even through this inexplicable suffering,
God will begin to work

v6. Naomi begins to travel home,
and for the first time God is mentioned.

God is blessing his people back in Bethlehem.

The house of bread has bread once again.

Naomi decides to go home.

In Bethlehem there is food, in Bethlehem, there is rain, in Bethlehem there might even be hope.

But as she starts to return with her daughters in law, they begin to talk.

There is a lot of talking in the Book of Ruth

Indeed is 52% dialogue.

So, guys, when the women start to gas, just remember....that it's Biblical.

(And, now I'm living dangerously)

Naomi says to her daughters – “leave me.

I have no sons, no money, and hope to offer you.

Go to Moab, go to your mothers, you need husbands not an old woman.”

Notice what she says:

Don't stay with me because...

v13. “it has been far more bitter for me than for you, for the hand of the Lord has turned against me”

Naomi blames God for her predicament.

(Maybe her husband had something to do with it? No, she blames God.)

She is full of rage, she is full of self-pity, and she cannot have been much of a travelling companion.

Orpah decides to go home, back to her own people,

back to Chemoch the fish god.

It makes sense.

Orpah had for a while looked like a convert, going with Naomi

but when push comes to shove she goes back to her pagan ways.

She tried this faith-in-God thing, and it didn't work.

So she goes back to being a good pagan girl in Moab.

But, then there is Ruth.

And now, Ruth is literally standing at a crossroads.

Back there is Moab,

Back there are her pagan friends and family and Chemoch the fish-god.

The place she grew up.

And ahead is Bethlehem.

Naomi's people, Yahweh the God of Israel – all strange and unknown – now which will it be?

And Ruth replies to Naomi, in words that are perhaps the most beautiful in the whole Bible:

“Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you.

Where you go, I will go.

Where you lodge, I will lodge.

Your people shall be my people

and your God, my God.

Where you die, I will die”

These are amazing words of faith.

Here Ruth commits her life to Naomi and to the people of God
and indeed to God himself.

She turns her back on one way of life, and sets her face towards Bethlehem.

And it is a bold move -

Will a Moabite be welcome in Bethlehem?

There is seemingly no husband, no plan, and no future there.

The sensible place to be is Moab.
But Ruth leaves all that behind her and sets her face towards Bethlehem.

She really is “stepping out” (To use Therese’s phrase):
like Abraham when he left Aram at 70
or like Peter onto the water.

And bitter old Naomi is silenced by her faith.
v18 “*she said no more to her*”

Her Jaw drops.

There is a time, isn’t there, where the faith of someone else leaves us amazed?
It inspires us, and it rebukes us
and we really don’t know what to say.

At Café Church, we’ve had people sharing their testimonies
and that sense of what God is doing in their lives
or the ways they’ve trusted him, sometimes in really difficult circumstances, cause us
to reflect and say:
“wow, what a God, and is that what faith looks like?”

Naomi and Ruth will be a team.

Bound together.

Naomi will guide Ruth, she’ll help the young convert understand how it works among
God’s people.

She’ll teach her how to fit in

That’s what Naomi will do for Ruth

But Ruth will be good for Naomi too,
because her enthusiasm, her dedication, her faith
will rebuke the bitter old woman.

You know, some of us have been Christian for a long time
and we have so much to offer those of you who are new to this game
we can teach you.

But your freshness and your energy, and the sense of what God is doing in your life, is
exactly what us old complacent cynics need to hear.

And so they come to Bethlehem,
and there is a commotion:

“It’s Naomi! She’s home!”

And Naomi responds

“Don’t call me Naomi – because Naomi means sweetness
Call me Mara – which means bitter”

“I went away full, but now I’m empty
the Lord has dealt harshly with me
and he’s brought calamity on me”

She says ‘Don’t call me sweetness, call me a bitter old hag.’

Do you know any bitter old hags?

It is difficult to warm to this Naomi.

Naomi who blames God for everything

Naomi who’s response to the suffering of her daughters-in-law was (v13) “I’ve had it
even worse than you!” “No one has suffered like me.”

Naomi can’t have been the easiest travelling companion for young Ruth.

And it's tempting to say.

"Oh Naomi - shut up
put a brave face on it.
stop with the moaning
doesn't the Bible tell us to rejoice in every circumstance?
Shut up with the self-pity!"

"Naomi, if you can't be happy, at least pretend to be"

And then all the people could have said
"Naaomi, it's great you're home!
How are you? How are things?"

And like any good Christian, she could have said "fine" "fine".

"My husband is dead, my sons are too, I'm penniless and alone – but fine!"

Because it is always good to lie, isn't it.
No?

You have to admire Naomi's honesty.
"I'm not fine. Really not fine."

"Actually, right now, I hate God.
I'm not an atheist, I just can't stand God"

And Naomi does exactly the right thing with all her hurt and frustration and anger –
she finds believing friends and she tells them what she's really feeling.

And they will listen to her
and they will pray for her
and they will correct her and advise her
and hug her
and cry with her.

The assembly of God's people is a place for honesty
because through honesty come healing.

There are just far too many Christians that feel hard done by,
they feel frustrated with their Christian life and faith,
they feel let down by God,
they feel let down by the Church,
because we all do at times.

But there are just too many people bottling it up,
and when you do that, the bitterness doesn't stay in
it comes out
like poison from a wound.
It comes out in cynicism and in defeatism
It comes out in irritation and impatience with other Christians
And in an unwillingness to forgive.

Better to say, "this is where I am at, listen to me"
because then maybe, God can heal.

Our passage ends by simply saying
"They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest"

It gets better.
The famine is over, and God is blessing his people again,
and the broken people,

the widows,
the refugees from Moab are home,
and despite this dreadful and inexplicable tragedy
God will start to work,
to heal,
and to bless,
and that's what the rest of the story is about.

So, let me ask you this:
Which one are you?
Which character do you identify with?

Elimelech (a bit)-
He likes to plan and sort it out.
He's the control freak – who takes care of it.
He's independent – he's self-sustaining.
“My God is King” – “but I'll make the choices”
“Jesus is Lord” – “but I've got it covered”

Recognise him? I think that's me.

Or maybe you are like Orpah.
You are tempted to turn back?

Or maybe you are sometimes like Naomi
– bitter, moody, cranky and frustrated
blaming God
yet totally honest, and totally loved by God.
You just have a lot of problems knowing that.

Or maybe you are like Ruth.

(If you are like Ruth can we have coffee soon, because you'll cheer me up? Indeed
can you have coffee with everyone?)

Maybe you are like Ruth.
You've just taken a huge step of faith
You've said “yes” to God and thrown in your lot with God's people.
And it is all exciting and new and strange and scary at the same time.

Whoever you are, and wherever you are with God,
the Book of Ruth invites us to meet the God who want to save and redeem and heal
and bless and hold and love.

So open yourself to that God.

Amen.

*Confession: – some parts of this were influenced by listening to a sermon by Mark
Driscoll (the bad bits are, however, my own).*