

Ruth 1:1-22

In the days when the Judges ruled, there was a famine in the land and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech, the name of his wife Naomi and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. ... They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. They took Moabite wives; the name of one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there for about ten years, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that Naomi was left without her two sons or her husband.

Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard that the Lord had had consideration for his people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law ... back to the land of Judah. Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, 'Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find security.' Then she kissed them and they wept aloud. They said to her, 'No, we will return with you to your people.' But Naomi said, 'Turn back, my daughters, why go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me.' Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

So Naomi said, 'See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.' But Ruth said,

'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—
there will I be buried.'

When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived, the whole town was stirred because of them; and the women said, 'Is this Naomi?'

She said to them,

'Call me Naomi no longer.
Call me Mara,
for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me.

I went away full,
but the Lord has brought me back empty;
why call me Naomi
when the Lord has dealt harshly with me,
and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?'

So Naomi returned together with Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, who came back with her from the country of Moab. They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

Mark 12:28-34

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, 'Which commandment is the first of all?' Jesus answered, 'The first is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." The second is this, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these.' Then the scribe said to him, 'You are right, teacher; you have truly said that "God is one, and besides God there is no other"; and "to love God with all the heart, and with all the understanding and with all the strength", and "to love one's neighbour as oneself", this is much more important than all burnt-offerings and sacrifices.' When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.'

MESSAGE Slowing down with Ruth

There are some stories that are splashed across the headlines that everybody knows about and has an opinion about. So this week, for instance, we have heard about ...

- The CoP26 climate conference in Glasgow



- Our Prime Minister's open spat with French President Macron

- ... and of course the finding of missing 4 year old girl Cleo Smith in Western Australia



Is God at work in these big headline grabbing stories? Probably, but it's sometimes hard to tell ...

But there are also thousands of other stories that don't make our news bulletins but which illustrate the struggles and joys of everyday life. These might include ...

- The joy of children back doing activities they love
- Visiting a friend we haven't seen since the start of lockdown
- Medical tests to try and discover what is going on in our body



Is God involved in these smaller stories? Perhaps, if we have eyes to see ...

In Israel's history, the headline stories involve people like Moses, Joshua, Samuel and David. Between the time of Joshua and Samuel, there was a tumultuous period that is known as the time of the Judges, when Israel was a fairly loose collection of tribes without a clear leader. The country was vulnerable to raids by its neighbours.

The people's faithfulness to Yahweh was fickle.

It was a time of heroes and enemies, desperation and deliverance.

The closing words of the book of Judges sum up this period:

*In those days there was no king in Israel;
all the people did what was right in their own eyes.*

Then when we turn the page in our Bibles we come to the story of Ruth and enter a different world – one that is smaller and slower. There are still elements of struggle and survival, sadness and joy – but all at the level of one family who come from a small rural community in Bethlehem where – in keeping with such communities – talk focuses on harvests and rain and drought and BTW have you seen Mary's new boyfriend?!

The story is told from the perspective of Naomi, who is married and has two sons and who is usually portrayed in artwork as looking old and sad. She wasn't always this way. As a younger woman, Naomi and her family move from their home in Bethlehem to the neighbouring country of Moab on the east side of the Dead Sea because there is a severe **famine** in their own country. They become climate refugees.



Naomi's two sons marry local women and their life continues.

But soon there is **death** and **loss** as Naomi's husband and then her two sons die. Apart from the expected grief this brings, Naomi is in a really tough position – she's a widow living in a foreign country with no family support and no means to support herself.

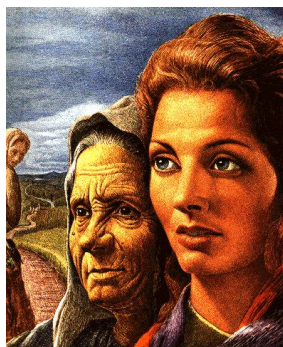
We may think of the difficulties faced by migrants and asylum seekers in this country – with no family, no government support, cut off from family by distance and more recently by Covid.

Unsurprisingly, Naomi becomes quite **bitter** and angry with God for allowing all this to happen. She decides to return home to Bethlehem where she no longer wants **to be called Naomi (meaning pleasant) but rather Mara (meaning bitter)**.

Having recently explored the book of Job, we may be thinking 'here we go again' – an innocent person suffering great hardship.

Life does sometimes seem cruel or unfair and at these times God can seem silent and hidden.

But there is another actor in this story who acts as a contrast to Naomi and that person is **Ruth**, one of her daughters-in-law. Naomi tries to persuade both her daughters-in-law to remain in Moab and to find new husbands and hopefully a better life for themselves.



But Ruth insists on accompanying Naomi back to Bethlehem, where she now becomes the foreigner living in a strange land.

Where Naomi can see only death and loss resulting in bitterness, Ruth is in many ways the opposite. She is filled with **faith** and **devotion** and **love** and becomes a real source of **blessing** for Naomi.



In an amazing vow she declares ...

*'Where you go, I will go.
Your people will be my people
and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die'.*

She will stick with Naomi through whatever the future holds for them and will trust the people of Bethlehem with her life and will throw herself fully into the mercy of Israel's God.

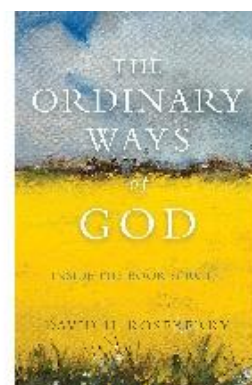
In some ways this reads like **a wedding vow** ... and one of our daughters-in-law, Helen, chose this reading from Ruth to be the main Bible passage in her wedding service. Given her Vietnamese background, it was all the more appropriate for a cross-cultural marriage.

While Ruth and Naomi are the main characters in this story, along with Boaz who we are yet to meet, there is another significant actor, one who appears in every scene and yet who has no speaking lines. Can you guess who this character is? ... It's God!

Naomi can only see through bitter eyes and feels harshly treated by God.

But if we look a little deeper, God is at work behind the scenes ...

- Providing a safe haven for Naomi and her family when there is famine in Bethlehem
- Providing good partners for her two sons, including Ruth who will turn out to be such a blessing in her life
- Sending rain and a good harvest to attract Ruth back home
- The excited welcome of the whole community when Naomi returns ... so she doesn't bear her burden alone but is supported by a loving community
- ... and as we shall see next time the serendipity of Ruth meeting Boaz, who is called a kinsman-redeemer, the close relative who can resolve their precarious social standing



So while the book of Judges paints a picture of a wild period filled with people who often lack faith and

who ignore the needs of others, the book of Ruth paints a very different picture. Here we see faith and trust and kindness at work in a small community – in a story that will never make the headlines and focused on a most unlikely hero – a young foreign woman.

Perhaps if we slow down and ignore the messy headlines in the news we too will recognise the small acts of love and kindness and faith that come to us from unlikely sources. We may also see that God is involved in many small ways in our lives, bringing blessing and hope, even in the midst of hardship and struggle.