

Planning for the future

17 November 2024

BIBLE READINGS

Open our eyes, O God, to the beauty of your word.

May our lips and our lives unite to honour you.

Psalm 127

Unless the Lord builds the house,
the builders labour in vain.

Unless the Lord watches over the city,
the guards stand watch in vain.

In vain you rise early
and stay up late,
toiling for food to eat –
for the Lord grants sleep to those he loves.

Children are a heritage from the Lord,
offspring a reward from him.

Like arrows in the hands of a warrior
are children born in one's youth.

Blessed is the man
whose quiver is full of them.

They will not be put to shame
when they contend with their opponents in court.

Ruth 3:1-13, 4:1-17

One day Naomi said to Ruth, 'My daughter, I must find a home for you, where you will be well provided for. Boaz, with whose women you have worked, is a close relative of ours. Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing-floor. Wash, put on perfume, and get dressed in your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing-floor, but don't let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do.'

So Ruth went down to the threshing-floor and did everything her mother-in-law told her to do.

In the middle of the night something startled Boaz; he looked – and there was a woman lying at his feet!

'Who are you?' he asked.

'I am your servant Ruth,' she said. 'Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian-redeemer of our family.'

‘My daughter, don’t be afraid. I will do for you what you ask. All the people of my town know that you are a woman of noble character. Although it is true that I am a guardian–redeemer of our family, there is another who is more closely related than me. Stay here for the night, and in the morning if he wants to do his duty as your guardian–redeemer, good. But if he is not willing, as surely as the Lord lives I will do it. Lie here until morning.’

In the morning Boaz went up to the town gate and sat down there just as the guardian–redeemer he had mentioned came along. Boaz said, ‘Come over here, my friend, and sit down.’ So he went over and sat down.

Boaz said to the guardian–redeemer, ‘Naomi, who has come back from Moab, is selling the piece of land that belonged to our relative Elimelek. If you will redeem it, do so.’

‘I will redeem it,’ he said.

Then Boaz added, ‘On the day you buy the land from Naomi, you also acquire Ruth the Moabite, the dead man’s widow, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property.’

At this, the guardian–redeemer said, ‘Then I cannot redeem it because I might endanger my own estate. You redeem it yourself. I cannot do it.’

Then Boaz announced to the town elders and all the people, ‘Today you are witnesses that I have bought from Naomi all the property of Elimelek, Kilion and Mahlon. I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite, Mahlon’s widow, as my wife, in order to maintain the name of the dead along with his property, so that his name will not disappear from among his family or from his home town.’

Then the elders and all the people at the gate said, ‘May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the family of Israel. May you be famous in Bethlehem.’

So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When he made love to her, the Lord enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. The women said to Naomi: ‘Praise be to the Lord, who this day has not left you without a guardian–redeemer. May this boy become famous throughout Israel! He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter–in–law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth.’

Then Naomi took the child in her arms and cared for him. The women living there said, ‘Naomi has a son!’ And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

For the word of God in Scripture,
for the word of God among us,



Naomi's plan is for Ruth to make herself as attractive as possible and then confront Boaz. It sounds like seduction 101!

Ruth, wash yourself and put on your best clothes.

Apply your best perfume and then when it's dark, sneak down to the threshing floor where the harvesters will be celebrating, but keep out of sight while the eating and drinking is going on.

See where our relative Boaz lies down to sleep and go and lie down at his feet and pull up his blanket. When he wakes up, do whatever he tells you.

That's the plan.

What could possibly go wrong with a plan like that?

Only that a somewhat drunk Boaz – or one of the other workers – might wake up and become angry or even rape Ruth, with no-one around to protect her.

And her outfit might suggest that she was asking for it.

Most of us would raise all sorts of objections to such a risqué plan, but Ruth simply says 'I'll do exactly what you say.'

To implement such a plan requires trust, courage and great vulnerability.

Ruth shows all of these qualities.

She implicitly trusts Naomi and presumably trusts Naomi's God to keep her safe.

She has courage to enter the male domain of the threshing floor, at night, alone.

And she is prepared to make herself very vulnerable by agreeing to do whatever Boaz asks of her.

When we pray, I wonder how often we ask God to build these qualities in us.

Do we ask for courage, great trust and willingness to be vulnerable?

Do we have courage to dream big and follow through on our dreams?

Naomi's plan is reliant on one further quality – namely the integrity of Boaz.

When he wakes up and is quite startled to find a well-dressed and perfumed woman at his feet, he asks who she is and presumably what she's doing there.

I am Ruth, the woman from Moab.

You are our guardian-redeemer, so honour your commitment to care for Naomi and me. Cover me with your figurative garment. Take care of us.

As a person of integrity, Boaz promises to act as next-of-kin and to do as Ruth asks. Boaz agrees to action the request that very day.

A quick word of explanation for what seems like a strange custom to us.

The word used here for redeemer is goel, the one who redeems or buys something back.

• Hebrew Titles of HaShem •

גוֹאֵל

GO'EL - REDEEMER

In the book of Exodus, God acts as the great Goel or Redeemer for Israel by reclaiming the nation from slavery in Egypt.

Hence the hymn we sing, Guide me O thou great Redeemer.

Within families, the goel had several roles laid out in the Law of Moses.

The goel could redeem a relative from slavery by paying money to release them, or pay restitution for an injury or, in this case, marry a widow and have a child with them who would inherit the dead man's name and land.

The goel effectively takes over the role of the widow's dead husband by marrying her and taking her to be an intimate part of the family. The closest relative in Naomi's case would be the brother of her dead husband, Elimelek, or perhaps a cousin of his sons Mahlon and Kilion.

Being a goel was a big responsibility, yet sounds very patriarchal to our ears with women seen more like property and less important than the reputation and continuing bloodline of the dead husband.



WHEN BROTHERS DWELL TOGETHER AND ONE OF THEM DIES WITHOUT A SON, THE WIDOW MUST NOT MARRY OUTSIDE THE FAMILY. HER HUSBAND'S BROTHER IS TO TAKE HER AS HIS WIFE AND FULFILL THE DUTY OF A BROTHER-IN-LAW FOR HER.

– DEUTERONOMY 25:5

But back to Boaz. He backs up his word by taking the matter up at the town gate, the place where legal matters were resolved.

He advises a near relative of Elimelek, Naomi's dead husband, that Naomi is selling the land belonging to Elimelek. But there's a catch.

You get the land, but as goel you also get the other 'property' of Elimelek, namely his widow Naomi and his daughter-in-law Ruth. Both the land and the widows are 'acquired' in the same transaction with the implication that as redeemer, the relative will also marry the women and have children through them.

The close relative will not take on this extra demand, but Boaz does, and so Naomi and Ruth become part of Boaz's family and Boaz takes Ruth to be his wife.

Blessing and favour follow.

Boaz and Ruth conceive a child, a son who is named Obed.

Naomi and Ruth now have a secure future with Boaz.

The story has reached a happy ending! Cue the credits.



But wait, there's more!

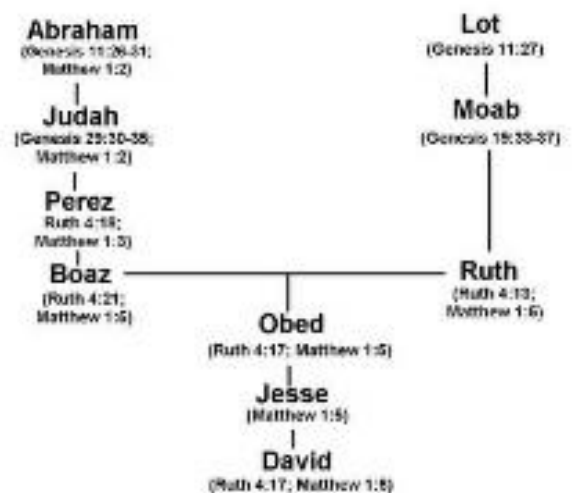
Obed eventually has a son, named Jesse, who eventually has a son named David, who becomes Israel's greatest king.

So there is more going on here than just a simple story about a family from Bethlehem.

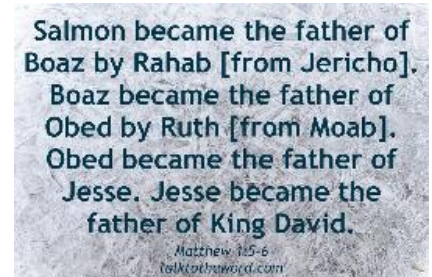
The townsfolk pronounce a blessing over Ruth – may she be like Rachel and Leah, two of the wives of Jacob, who helped build the clan and house of Jacob, the famous patriarch who was later renamed as Israel following an encounter with God. Like Ruth, Rachel and Leah were foreigners but became important parts of the household of Israel.

There may also be an apology here for the actions of David who likewise married foreign wives and who recruited foreign fighters to his army.

Family Tree of Ruth



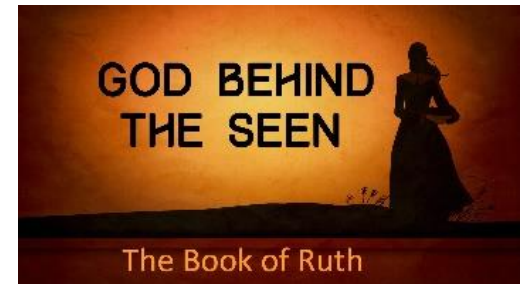
For us as Christians, it's a reminder that God welcomes and blesses all people. Ruth is named in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus. She is both accepted and honoured among the listed generations of faithful Israelites which eventually leads to the birth of Jesus, also in Bethlehem, which we remember and celebrate at Christmas.



For the writer of the story of Ruth, this all seems to be part of God's bigger plan, a plan that is quietly taking shape behind the scenes, a plan that involves ordinary people like Naomi and Ruth and Boaz acting in ordinary but godly ways in the other six days of the week.

God is not the main actor in this story.

God does not directly do anything, yet hovers in the background of each person's actions. God's grace and love are at work but it's hard to see, just as God's role in our lives may be hard to see much of the time. But it's there!



In this simple story, Ruth *happens* to go to the field of Boaz ... who *happens* to be a close relative of Naomi. But this guiding hand of God's unseen grace doesn't absolve them of responsibility to think, speak and take responsibility for their actions.

Naomi had to plan with boldness ...

Ruth had to have courage to act ...

Boaz had to demonstrate kindness and integrity.

Blessing and ripples of grace spread out from the story of Ruth that influence our attitudes towards God and towards foreigners and that nudge us to live lives of courage, faithfulness and integrity.

As we do, God's purposes and plans are fulfilled through ordinary people like us acting in ordinary – and sometimes in extraordinary – ways.