

Pentecost 23
8/11/2009

Mark the Evangelist

Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17

Psalm 127

Hebrews 9:24-28

Mark 12:38-44

Ruth, Naomi and the hospitality of God

Molly O'Neill was a widow who in the 1950s came to be the teacher at our small country school. A catholic, she and her six-year-old son found themselves amongst a strongly Protestant community, many of whom had the name of Smith. On a bitterly cold winter's day she gathered her 12 pupils around the fire, told us the story of Ruth, and had us learn the memorable lines:

Entreat me not to leave you
or to return from following after 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 -
and there I will be buried.
May the Lord do thus and so to me,
and more as well, even if death parts me from you!

In hindsight it was a surprising event. A Catholic lay-woman introduced a rich story from scripture to group of Protestant school children at a time when it was common to believe Catholics did not read the Bible.

Symbolically there was even more to it. Ruth's story is about pain and loss, desolation and restoration, about difficult choices involving love, loyalty and trust between women – widows, who in those days were among the most marginalised. And since the border protection debate is alive amongst us again, it is impossible to pass over the fact that this story is also about the power of hospitality and welcome in a foreign context, such as Molly O'Neill herself was experiencing at the time, and to which she brought her own special version of life.

The story of Ruth is that during a famine, Naomi, from Bethlehem, went to live in Moab with her husband and two sons. Her sons married Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth, and then, sadly, all three men died. Naomi decided to return to Bethlehem and urged her widowed daughters in law to stay in Moab. Orpah chose to stay, but Ruth made the momentous decision to go, and pledged herself to Naomi. Ruth did not belong to the faith or race of Israel, and in that world women had rights and privileges only in so far as they were connected to a man and a lineage. As it stands, Ruth's decision looks like cultural suicide. She abandoned her family of origin, her national identity, and changed her religion, in order to go with Naomi. Her deep love for her aged and broken mother in law manifested itself in risk, courage and trust. If Abraham is a male paradigm of what faithfulness is Ruth provides us with a feminine example of someone who risked everything, without the promise of a husband, hope for children, or a future.

Generosity and hospitality are significant in this story. In the years she was in Moab Naomi had been the recipient of great kindness from her daughters-in-law, and the people of that place. At the point where Naomi tries to talk Orpah and Ruth into staying behind she says: *may the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and me.* The biblical concept of loving kindness resonates with this speech. Loving-kindness is of the essence of God and the remarkable thing is here the love of two foreign women for their Hebrew mother-in-law is compared with the loving-kindness of God.

The section of the story we read today includes further examples of welcome and hospitality, thanks to which the perilous journey made by the women led to new life for Naomi, in the form of Ruth's marriage to Naomi's relative Boaz. Because of this union Ruth became the great grandmother of King David, and finds a place in the genealogy of Jesus.

There are at least three things to say about this. One is the book of Ruth may have been a protest against Ezra and Nehemiah who directed that mixed marriages should be dissolved. It could be the author of Ruth is making the point that purity of love is not conditional upon ethnic purity. Secondly this is a story of fidelity: Ruth to Naomi, Boaz to Ruth, and ultimately of God to the people in this story. Thirdly, it is significant that Ruth's fidelity results in Jesus having some non-Hebrew blood in his veins. God's ways and purposes are not restricted to certain people, or certain conditions. God is at work where love and loving-kindness dwell, creating new beginnings even amongst pain, desolation and loss. When Naomi returned home she was a symbol of emptiness. She said: *I went away full and the Lord has brought me back empty.* But the mood does not stay: *they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the Barley harvest.* Bethlehem - the house of bread - and the crops are being harvested. It is a time of great fecundity, a time of hope and promise. New life does come and God is the giver: *the Lord made Ruth conceive.* Wholeness and well-being come to vulnerable people who had suffered, struggled, grieved and lost, but found welcome and hospitality in a strange place.

There is a strong feminine touch in this story, which is not overpowered by the appearance of Boaz. The women decide. The women shape the tale and at the end the women say: *a son has been born to Naomi.* But the story goes beyond being about a new birth. It says: "they named him Obed. He became the father of Jesse, the father of David". There is much more to this than genealogy and the establishment of a political line based on David. During Advent we sometimes sing: "Hail to the Lord's anointed, great David's *greater* Son..." The meaning behind this can be traced to the Gospel today. The twin stories about self seeking religious people and widows who gave their last coins to the church are often taken as being about different sorts of piety, and it is assumed we should all denounce the scribes and emulate the widow. But in context, if we read this text politically, we see that Jesus has just won an argument the point of which is the Messiah is not David's son in the sense that he is subject to David. Jesus taught that the authority of the Messiah was prior to and greater than that of David. So it is significant that on the day that he left the Temple for the last time, and predicted it would be overthrown, Jesus challenges everything the Temple had come to stand for. It had become the sacred receptacle of power for an educated religious class that legitimated its authority by devouring the property of widows. Scribes were meant to uphold the vocation of Torah Judaism, which was to

protect the widows and the poor. But in Mark, at every turn, Scribal greed and quest for position and privilege is denounced as the opposite of the Kingdom ethics expressed in all that Jesus does and stands for. Against this Scribal piety had become a thin veil for privilege won through economic exploitation, and Jesus' words over the widow's mite can be read as a lament, because Temple upkeep had robbed her of her livelihood.

Although Jesus was presented in the Temple at his birth, his advent and death brought in the era when Temple worship ceased and the legitimacy of scribal authority was broken down. In him we see the brightness of a new light. The grace of God embraces not just one class, or even one people, but is poured out for all. Jesus did not rehabilitate an old imperial vision of what Davidic Israel should be in the world. Rather, he challenged those who looked for the restoration of political power to submit to the authority of the Messiah, in whom God was offering a new way of living that honoured God and was hospitable, inclusive and modelled what it means to be servant of all. God's faithfulness to this vision is revealed in the resurrection, in which we see that God does not resile from following after the people of the world to call us back to the gift of life. And the contours of this faithfulness are seen far back in the story of Ruth, a foreigner who, through love and hospitality, became and ancestor of Jesus of Nazareth, and gained a share in the gracious hospitality of God.
