

Ruth 1:1-18
Psalm 146
Mark 12:38-44

Ruth, the Christ

It has been said of the book of Ruth that ‘the whole world takes this story to its heart’ (Naomi Rosen). It is a gently beautiful story. Tragic in its beginnings, it moves through hope to restoration. Ruth, Naomi and Boaz – the chief protagonists in the story – are filled with recognisable humanity, and the emotion and integrity of their responses to the accidents of their lives are no small part of what gives the story its charm.

Why we have Ruth in the biblical collection might be guessed from some of its principal themes. Ruth’s ‘foreignness’ as a Moabite is strongly emphasised, possibly as a counter to movements against the foreigner in Israel, such as we find in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. And there may be a lesson reinforcing the responsibility of family members to take up the cause of widows through re-marriage (‘levirate’ marriage responsibilities in which a man marries his brother’s widow). The story also serves as a prelude to the establishment of the kingship in Israel, with the last few verses identifying Ruth as the great grandmother of King David, whose story continues to unfold in the next biblical book. This last purpose is perhaps all the more provocative as it gives the very ‘Jewish’ David a very non-Jewish ancestry in a testimony to the startling freedom of God.

Whatever possible *historical* reason for the book or intentions of its authors, our reading of it over the next few weeks will be quite unhistorical, in usual sense of that word. We will cast the important aspects of the story as *patterns* for things yet to be fully revealed in the history of salvation and a long way from what could have been the intention of Ruth’s authors. This reflects the Bible’s ‘typological’ method, a patterning of one story or identity into another. A biblical ‘type,’ in this technical sense, is an event or identity which anticipates something yet to come – the ‘antitype’ (the Greek prefix ‘anti’ here meaning ‘in place of’ or ‘upon’). In this way the Bible links together events and persons which otherwise look quite different but are understood to embody the same reality, the same kinds of relationship or actions. Our question will be, In what ways might the story of Ruth, Boaz and Naomi be not simply hi/story and example but also reveal something of God in Christ?

Our focus today will be Ruth’s startling expression of devotion at the end of today’s reading:

‘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.
May the LORD do thus and so to me,
 and more as well, if even death parts me from you!’

This is an extraordinary promise; perhaps only the promises made in a wedding ceremony or implied in daring to bring a child into existence come close to it, although without exceeding it.

In fact, it is perhaps beyond any of us to make such an unconditional promise, fearless as it is – even reckless – and rising to contradict even death. Such is not the promise of a mortal but of a god. And here we uncover the first of our ‘unhistorical’, typological readings of this text: the word Ruth speaks to Naomi is the word God speaks to the world in the ministry of Jesus, the incarnate Son. For what else does God do in Jesus but demonstrate ‘where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God’? This is the shape of the Incarnation: Jesus is with us, as we are.

Ruth’s devotion, then, is a sign of the Christ, a ‘type’ or pattern of Christ. She – as he – is absolutely devoted to one who she is with. Reading the story typologically, however, takes us beyond seeing Ruth as simply giving a moral lesson in devotion or a call to acceptance of those who are different. These lessons are clear in the story but if Ruth’s words are what God expresses in the Incarnation, then the story puts to us that it is not Ruth (only) who is the surprising foreigner, but *God*.

This shifts the meaning of the ‘difference’ theme in the text. The foreignness of Ruth – or of anyone we reject as foreign here and now – is no longer a characteristic of her alone, with God beyond all our difference yet compelling us to accept what is different between us. The foreignness of those who are different to us is the foreignness of *God*, for it is God who is the true foreigner. The imperative to love our neighbours is an imperative to love God (which, by the way, reminds us of 1 John, with whom we’ve spent so much time this year).

In the Incarnation God commits to us fearlessly, even recklessly. This is not clear until God is revealed as the stranger, the one rejected as dangerously foreign – a revelation which must wait until even death itself is contradicted in the resurrection, and Jesus now holds a double strangeness – strangely persisting after death but still the same strange Jesus, calling us to the same repentance, the same strange vision of God-among-us.

Against our confidence that God fits – or should fit – our mode of thought, our way of being, our political aspirations, in Ruth the stranger becomes a sacrament of God.

This is why we gather each week around a table not our own, in response to an invitation we did not issue, to be fed – strangely – with the fruits of human alienation from each other and from God: the cross of a Moabite Christ.

We are so fed in order to become ourselves such strange food, foreigners devoted to those who live in alienation and grief, the unexpected possibility of reconciliation and peace.

Ruth’s word to Naomi is Jesus’ word to us, that it might become our word to those around us.

‘Where you go, I will go;
 where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people, and your God my God.’

The gospel and the law are that it cannot properly be any other way.
