

Pentecost 26
18/11/2018

Mark the Evangelist

Ruth 3:1-13
Psalm 46
Mark 13:1-8

Naomi, Ruth and Boaz: Glorious Ordinary

In a sentence:

In the midst of all that goes on in the world, God is also ‘going on’

Something which is not immediately obvious in the story of Ruth, and yet becomes increasingly pressing once we notice it, is that God is pretty much absent from the story.

God is invoked for blessing, is blamed for Naomi’s tragedy, and is praised and thanked at the end but is not *active* in the story in a way which is typical of the other biblical historical narratives: God doesn’t say anything or do anything (the allusions to such action in 1.6 and 4.14 notwithstanding).

God’s part in the story is less as protagonist than as ‘*context*’. God is a frame within which the players in the drama do their thing, to which they refer, upon which they rest: God is the *space* within which Ruth and Boaz and Naomi live and move and have their being.

The effect of this is to render what actually happens in the story less important than it might first seem, or at least to shift *how* the action is important. Today we have heard something of what led to the marriage of Boaz and Ruth. But for the time to read it, we might have heard the whole book – for the whole of the story leads to the marriage and the birth of Obed and to the link this has to one of the very great stories of the Old Testament – the story of David. Yet if God is more context than agent in the story, then the purpose of narrating Ruth’s marriage to Boaz and the birth of their son becomes less clear.

If God *were* portrayed as directly active in the book, then the story would be more clearly one of the blessing of God on everyone still standing at the end, for whatever reason the blessing might have been given. This is perhaps the typical reading: Ruth and Boaz are blessed because their devotion and loyalty is something good.

But God *is* very much in the background. In fact, the story would be just as charming, and perhaps even easier to read and enjoy, were God not referred to at all. This suggests that the link between what the people do in the story and God’s own interest in these people is less direct than is often presumed.

It is possible to imagine that our generally very charitable assessment of the characters in the story rests on the basis of an assumption that God is *responding* to the situation of those characters – the tragic Naomi, the loyal Ruth and the righteous Boaz. A little more cynically, it does not take much imagination to recast Naomi as the embittered schemer, Ruth as gullible – or perhaps even as seductress – and Boaz as a good-hearted old fogey who suddenly finds he can’t believe his luck. We are far enough away culturally from the historical context that we cannot be at all confident that we understand what is really going on between Ruth and her mother-in-law, or between Ruth and Boaz on the threshing floor, or in the negotiations for Naomi’s plot of land.

The question is, does the lesson of the book as a whole change if Naomi, Ruth and Boaz are rather more morally ambiguous figures? The climax of the story would seem to be the birth of the child, and the link of the story to David. But the point cannot be that Ruth's loyalty and openness to the God of Israel 'earned' her this connection to David, or even brought David forth. This is because David had six other great grandparents whose stories we do not know. We have no guarantee, and might well imagine that it could never have been given, that the story of each great grandmother and great grandfather of David was just as virtuous as we've been given to imagine that Ruth and Boaz were. We've no guarantee that they, too, are rewarded for their goodness with a link to David.

The point of the story then comes to be – or at least *a* point might be – that, as people go about doing what people do – grieving, promising, reaping and gleaning, scheming, seducing, marrying, giving birth – God gets on doing what God does. If it were the case that Naomi did scheme to manoeuvre Ruth into Boaz' bed, that a simple Ruth just did what she was told and that Boaz then ran a ploy to secure her and her inheritance as his own – and then the baby was born – none of this change the *context* within which it all happened.

To put it differently, whatever seems to be going on in the world – for better and for worse – God also is 'going on' in the world. In the book of Ruth the lives of a few of us are given to us as the very life of God, the *lifeblood* of God. It is in and through these that *God* lives and moves and has his being.

This is the scandal of the incarnation: that our life could be the life of God. As we saw last week, the devotion of Ruth to Naomi – her 'cleaving' (1.14, AV) to Naomi – is how God is with us: where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge...

To speak of Jesus as both human and divine is not to say anything about the 'stuff' of which he was made, but to say that the life of God and the life of the world are properly bound together in this way. The life of God looks like the life of a human being, and the life of a human being is how God chooses to be.

This is not, however, a *moral* assessment; the point is not that only a 'good' human life is God's lifeblood. For even Jesus is morally ambiguous; this is what the cross shows – that the life of God will not always *look* like the stuff of God, yet still it is.

This is the promise upon which we are to build our lives – that God *makes* us God's own. This is the measure of us; there is nothing else upon which we rely to tell us who we are.

What we are and do is and is done in the God who, despite what little we can sometimes see and what little we sometimes see, brings forth from our lives the anointed one, the christ in its several guises – David the forerunner, Jesus the incarnate Son, and even the motley crew called, amazingly, Christ's own Body. Sometimes it will look as if this happens *because* of us. Too often, we must confess, it will happen *despite* us but always and everywhere it is *for* us that God creates *out* of us, as if out of nothing ('*ex nihilo*' ...).

In God we have our beginning and in God we will find our end; in this way, God is nearer to us than we are to ourselves.

This is Ruth's story, and it is ours.

The story of Ruth declares to us: Do not be afraid; eat, drink, live and love – and God will take care of the rest.
