

**Pentecost 24**  
**11/11/2012**

**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**

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The story of Ruth is most well known because of the words spoken to her mother in law Naomi as she set out from Moab to return to her home in Bethlehem.

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!

These poignant words are often read at weddings, but there is much more to it than marriage. Ruth's story is about pain and loss, desolation and restoration, about difficult choices involving love, loyalty and trust between two women – widows, who in those days were among the most marginalised people of all.

And we must not pass over the fact that this story is also about the power of hospitality and welcome in a foreign context which, when it is offered has a transforming effect on the lives of both the givers and receivers. This is something it may be good to ponder as the border protection debate continues in our land.

The background 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 foreigners, 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 the world of that day 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 appears to be 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. She gave all she had. 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 that 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. At the end of their perilous journey Naomi was welcomed and restored to home, and Ruth's marriage to Naomi's relative Boaz added a whole new dimension to their life. Because her marriage Ruth became the great grandmother of King David, and is given a place in the genealogy of Jesus.

There are at least three things to say about all of this. Firstly the book of Ruth may have been a protest against Ezra and Nehemiah who directed that mixed marriages should be dissolved. It could be that the author of Ruth set out to make 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, Ruth's love for her mother-in-law resulted in Jesus having some non-Hebrew blood in his veins. Some people may not care about that, but from a Christian point of view this fact proclaims that 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 did 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. In this story new life does come and God is the giver: *the Lord made Ruth conceive.* Wholeness and well-being come to vulnerable people who have 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.* Now that is different. But the story goes beyond the birth when 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 all they had 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 challenged everything the Temple had come to stand for. It had become the sacred receptacle of power for an educated religious class of men 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 did and stands for.

Although Jesus was presented in the Temple at his birth, his advent and death belong in the era when Temple worship ceased and the legitimacy of scribal authority was broken down. In him the brightness of a new light shone. The grace of God embraced not just one class, or even one people, but was 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 be open the authority of a completely different kind of Messiah. One in whom God was offering a new way of living that honoured God, was hospitable and inclusive, and modelled what it means to be servant of all. God's faithfulness to this vision is revealed in the resurrection, which testifies that God does not turn away from following after the people of the world, but continues to accompany us in our life, and grace us again with its gift. The contours of this faithfulness are seen far back in the story of Ruth, a foreigner who, through love and hospitality, became an ancestor of Jesus of Nazareth, and gained a share in the gracious hospitality of God.

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