

Ruth 4:13-22  
Psalm 126  
John 18:33-37

### The difference between a story and a book

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*In a sentence:*

God makes of our stories a book, of our words a Word

Our Prime Minister advised this week that Australians are concerned about population: ‘The roads are clogged, the buses and trains are full. The schools are taking no more enrolments... They are saying: enough, enough, enough.’ Hearing ‘loud and clear’ what the people have said, the PM indicated that, to ease the strain, he would move to cut immigration to Australia.

Now, this was an economic assessment. It has to be admitted that pulpits are generally places which manifest economic incompetence and, were I to attempt to analyse what the PM said in economic terms, I would demonstrate that this pulpit is no different in that respect!

My response to the PM’s announcement, however, was not to its economics but to its devastating blandness. There is here no sense of a bigger picture, no sense of movement to a goal, no sense of *history*. There is apparently nowhere to go, nothing in which we are involved beyond what is already before us – or, more to the point, what is behind us. What we look forward to, or perhaps can really only expect, is an intensification of ourselves and what we have already achieved – even safer streets, even better healthcare, even quicker transit, more accessible and better tailored entertainment on a faster broadband network and, of course, longer battery life in our smart phones. These are the kinds of things our politicians promise us because, to be frank, they amount to about as much as we can imagine it is worth being promised. The kingdom has largely come and what remains to arrive approaches in the increments which come with the passage of time in a stable society.

That is to say, history is for us *chronos* – the tick-tock of a clock, the accumulation of events and achievements. The old Greeks knew that the god Chronos ate his children, and we new Greeks know just as well that we will be consumed. Our politics – our life together – is directed towards being consumed later rather than earlier, while we hope that – when our time comes – Time’s bite proves to be quick and his teeth sharp. In the meantime, we work so that time ticks over *quietly* – less traffic, more space – in a world in which there is nothing to see except what can be seen.

But time and history – what we are *doing* in the world – can be imagined differently. We see this in our readings from Ruth if we take care to note the distinction between the *book* of Ruth and the *story* of Ruth.

The *story* of Ruth is the sum of all she ever did. The story of Ruth more or less comes to its end with the birth of Obed. Most tellings of a person’s story would end in that way, be they comedy or tragedy: the achievement or tragedy of the protagonist is the end of her story. This is time and history as the sequence of events – ‘What Ruth did’ and ‘What Ruth did next.’ In the end, Chronos catches up, and Ruth does no more.

By contrast, the *book* of Ruth is the ‘value’ of the story. The story of Ruth becomes the book of Ruth with the addition of a few verses running on past her to David: ‘[and Obed] became the father of Jesse, [who became] the father of David...’ So far as the story of Ruth goes, these verses are unnecessary. Ruth and Boaz don’t know what happens next. David is their descendent but not their story. Things going as they usually do – especially then – people tend to have descendants; there is nothing new to see here.

The *book* of Ruth, however, places her beautiful but also quite normal and self-contained story within the larger context of David who – in his brilliance and brokenness – becomes a sign of God’s presence to the world. The book of Ruth *requires* her story but also moves beyond it or, more the point, *re-casts* it. Story becomes book, words become Word, time truly becomes history – a movement not merely from necessary beginning to inevitable end but from divine inception to surprising consummation.

As a society, we today know only our story; we do not know our book. We know time but not history. We have our gods but not God.

The church, of course, is not much different most of the time. If there is anything to be said for the church, it is not that our story is any better but that we expect our story – with the story of the world – to become a book. We expect to be surprised at what the plot actually turned out to be, at how inception found its way to completion.

For we hold that, while we spend our lives writing our story, God is writing a book. Growing in Christian faith is about recognising more deeply that our lives in this world are the stuff of God. These lives *in themselves* are not God but they carry a plot which is beyond our sense and yet which could not be carried forward without us.

This is the case whether we lives which appear worthy or unworthy of such extraordinary purpose. We noted last week that it cannot be the righteousness of Ruth and Boaz which saw them the forebears of the great king; the king was always coming, regardless. And there is plenty of human failure in the Scriptures – not least king David himself – which nevertheless becomes the vehicle of divine blessing.

But if we believe that our lives are the stuff of God – the means by which God *becomes* God for us and redeems us – why would we *not* live as if it were so?

Why would we not pray for our enemies for the sake of the book – for the sake of where history will end – rather than crush them for the sake of our own passing story? Why keep for ourselves what could be given, to link stories which will finally be bound together anyway? Migrant visas come to mind, as well as loose change dropped into a beggar’s cup. Why eat and drink mere bread and wine when it might be God himself by which we are nourished? Why would we not choose to breathe and move through Spirit instead of mere air?

In such ways we sign that our stories are more than we can yet see, that we trust in One who declares,

Where you go I will go, where you lodge I will lodge, your people shall be my people...

We trust in this One because when the promise is kept, we find ourselves caught up no longer in a bland hi-story of a kingdom already come but in the advent of God’s anointed king.

This would be a story worth living.

Step out, then, not for more of our yesterday but for God’s tomorrow.

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