

Pentecost 24
7/11/2021

Mark the Evangelist

Ruth 3:1-13
Psalm 146
Mark 12:38-44

On becoming the life of God

In a sentence

In the midst of all that goes on in the world, God is also 'going on', making of our lives surprising new possibilities.

Something not immediately obvious in the story of Ruth is that God is pretty much absent from the narrative.

God is invoked for blessing, is blamed for Naomi's tragedy, and is praised and thanked at the end. But God is not *active* in the story in the way typical of the other biblical 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, 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 and, ultimately, to the birth of Obed and a link to one of the central 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. This is perhaps the typical reading: Ruth and Boaz are blessed because their devotion and loyalty is something good. God *responds* to the need and character of the tragic Naomi, the loyal Ruth and the righteous Boaz.

Yet, a little more cynical reading could recast Naomi as the embittered schemer, Ruth as gullible – or perhaps even as seductress – and Boaz as a good-hearted old fogy who can't believe his luck. We are far enough away culturally from the historical context that we can't be at all confident we understand what is 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. It's almost impossible not to impose our own social experience and expectation on the story.

But this narrows the possibilities of the text. Would 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 its link 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. David had six other great grandparents whose stories we do not know. We have no guarantee 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. And so, we've no guarantee that their

link to David is a reward for their goodness. If the author did understand Ruth to have been rewarded for her devotion, we cannot.

This is not to say that goodness doesn't matter but it is to say that goodness is not where the story starts. In Ruth's story, as people go about doing what people do – grieving, promising, reaping and gleaning, scheming, seducing, annexing, 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. They have done their thing, and God is doing God's thing. The identity of the baby is the sign of God's hand over what we think and do, however we are motivated. By God's hand, the anointed one will emerge from within our midst, though we cannot see him coming.

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 live that *God* lives and moves and has his being. We – virtuous or not – are *God's* context.

This is the scandal of the incarnation: that the shape of *our* life could be the shape of the life of *God*. The devotion of Ruth to Naomi with which the story begins – Ruth's 'cleaving' (1.14, AV) to Naomi – this 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 the promise upon which we are to build our lives – that God *makes* us God's own. What we are and do is and is done in the God who brings forth from our imperfect lives the anointed one, the christ in its various guises: David the forerunner, Jesus the incarnate Son, and the motley crew called, amazingly, Christ's own Body – even us here today.

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 – surprisingly – as if out of nothing ('*ex nihilo*'...).

And so, today, we baptise.

Today, we take a piece of the world – one of us – and make of it a piece of God, a member of the Body of Christ.

Today, we glimpse what Ruth did not but what she nevertheless was: a human life becoming the life of God, and God's life becoming ours.

Thanks be to God.
