

Followers of the Way

'Where you go, I will go'

Lynda Rose, 29-05-22

Ruth 1:1-18

Sermons on Ruth tend to focus on what happens when she and Naomi, her mother-in-law, get to Israel, and her meeting and marriage to Boaz, but this morning I want us to focus on the first part of the story, set in Moab.

Moab was the name of an ancient Levantine kingdom, located in what is today Jordan. Ethnically, the people had the same roots as the Israelites, being descended from Moab, a son of Lot, who of course was one of Abraham's nephews, who had to flee from Sodom. But Moab was conceived through incest, after Lot's two daughters seduced the old man when he was drunk, in an attempt to preserve the family line, following their flight (Genesis 19). So Moab is a nation born, and rooted, in incest.

Perhaps predictably, with this kind of beginning, the Moabites didn't worship Yahweh, but took as their god-protector, Chemosh. Not much is known about this deity, but the name probably meant 'Subduer', 'Destroyer', or even Fish god – which feels a little counter-intuitive, when you think that Moab was surrounded on three sides by land, and on the other bordered the Dead Sea, which of course doesn't have fish. But we do know that worship of Chemosh involved human sacrifice and sexual immorality, and that the kingdom flourished between the 14th and 6th centuries BC, finally disappearing in 582 BC, when it was conquered by the Babylonians.

Ruth is written towards the end of the period when Israel was governed by Judges, and we know that, historically, there was a history of hostility and armed conflict between Moab and Israel. In Numbers, for instance, the Moabite king, Balak, attempted to defeat the Israelites by cursing them, hiring a well-known diviner, Balaam, for the purpose. That failed spectacularly (and you can read the story in Numbers 22 -24), but then, in the following chapter, chapter 25, we read that the Moabite women lured the Israelite warriors into sexual immorality, inviting them to join in their sacrifices. Which they did, and which brought a plague upon Israel in retribution, killing 24,000 – after which Moabites were forbidden to enter the assembly of the Lord.

So, it's fair to say that Moab was not just pagan, but was also known as being sexually immoral and depraved. And it was to this country that Elimelech chose to take his family, when Judah was struck by famine. Not perhaps a very good idea, on the face of it. But it gets worse, because Moab was also part of the wilderness area that the Israelites had had to pass through on their way to the Promised Land, so by choosing to go back there to escape the famine, Elimelech was symbolically taking his family back into the wilderness. And away from God.

That apart, it seems for a time at least that the family did okay. They clearly survived, but then Elimelech died, after which Naomi's two sons married Moabite women – but this too would have been a bit problematic, because Yahweh had specifically forbidden

the Israelites to inter-marry with the surrounding nations. And, who knows, maybe this was one of the reasons disaster struck and that the sons also died, leaving Naomi and her daughters-in-law alone, and having to fend for themselves. Three childless widows. In a very real sense, Naomi was like Job. Overnight she lost everything – home, husband, sons, her livelihood ... forced by circumstance into the lowest stratum of society, joining the ranks of the widows and poor.

At this point, hearing that the famine was over and that God was doing good things back in Israel, Naomi decided she wanted to go back home. Now it sounds from the text that Naomi's relationship with her daughters-in-law was actually very good – there feels to be real love and concern between the three women. They set out on the road together, but then Naomi – realising their prospects if they continued with her – tells them to go back to their mothers' homes and find new husbands.

Now the reality for women in the ancient world was that, if they had no husband, they had no support and were sunk. They could beg, or become prostitutes, but that was pretty much it. Under Jewish law, of course, if a man died childless, his brother was required to marry his widow, to carry on the line. But that wasn't an option here, because both Naomi's sons were dead. So, realistically, the only chance for Orpah and Ruth was to go back to their homes and find new husbands. Orpah sees the sense of this, so she agrees, but Ruth, against all reason, refuses. v.16, "Where you go, I will go," she says, "and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and Your God my God ..."

This is actually incredible. There's no kind of promise, or even hint, of security for the two women. In fact, the future looks pretty bleak. But Naomi, seeing Ruth's commitment, accepts her.

This is a really big deal. Ruth is throwing in her lot with Naomi, with absolutely no certainty as to the outcome. Out of love and loyalty to the other woman, she's choosing the life, effectively, of an outcast. And Naomi, for her part, is taking on responsibility for a Moabite – taking her into Israel. Did she stop to reflect, I wonder, that Israelites didn't much like Moabites and fraternising was forbidden? Did she wonder, even for a moment, how the folk back home might react? For both women, there was no certainty as to the outcome ... and possibly, realistically, not much hope. Only dogged determination, and commitment – to each other, and to God.

Well, we know the end of the story, and we know that despite the fact Ruth was a pagan, and therefore sinful, God accepted her unconditionally. More than that, we know He did something amazing in her life, and that she became vital to His plan for redemption. Because through Ruth's marriage to Boaz, she became the mother of Obed, who in turn became the father of Jesse, the father of David ... from which line Christ himself was born.

Why on earth did God choose a woman with this kind of background to be so vital a part of His plan to redeem mankind? Couldn't he have used some fine, upstanding Jewish woman? Did He really have to go with the dregs like this? But that's something about God, isn't it? He takes the damaged and broken – the unutterably flawed – and out of our wrecked desolation brings forth something beautiful and new. He sees the

perfection we might become – that He wants us to become – so He reaches out to us in love, where we are, and transforms us ... into something beautiful. His precious child. All that's needed is that we turn to Him, unconditionally, and give Him our obedience. 'Where you go, I will go.' And, in response, God says, 'Where you follow, I will lead ... I will love you and care for you, and 'recreate' you.'

Ruth didn't know where she was going, and she didn't know how things might turn out. Going to Israel might well have been a disaster! For us too, the call is to put our hand into the hand of God, and to step into the dark. Not knowing where we're going, but trusting that God is leading, and that He'll look after us and provide.

But what about Naomi? As far as we know, she'd gone willingly with Elimelech to Moab, and maybe she shouldn't have done. After all, there's no record of God having told the couple to up sticks and go there, nor of Him telling them to marry their sons to Moabite women. So maybe Naomi deserved what happened to her! Well, whether you think that or not, the reality for this woman, finding herself suddenly destitute, must have been appalling. Yet what really stands out is that, through it all, Naomi hung onto her faith. As far as we know, she never once questions or blames God for the appalling things that have happened, and there's no hint that she tries to hedge her bets, by offering a quick sacrifice to Chemosh. On the contrary, she seems to stay faithful when everything literally is falling apart and she has no idea what – if anything – lies ahead; and no certainty of improvement.

We need to learn from that. In a very real sense, we're living today, I think, in Moab – in a sexually depraved, immoral and Godless society, that practises child sacrifice, and that claims to be in control. We're a part of it. But our Godless society is falling apart. The world is falling apart ... Our call, in amongst the chaos, is to be faithful and trust. To follow blindly maybe, but in absolute assurance, wherever the Lord leads.

The book of Ruth actually isn't about Naomi, or Ruth, or Boaz. It's all about God – about sin, and His plans for our salvation. God is the architect of all that happens in Ruth, and all that's required is that Naomi and Ruth follow His commands, even though they don't have a clue where it's all leading.

For us today, God is working to bring His plans to completion. In order to bring about salvation, there is a battle ahead. But this is God's battle, and all that is required of us is that we follow. 'Where you go, I will go.'