

2026 TALK, 1.2.26, RUTH 1:1-9a, 16-22, 4:9-17

THE HOLY SPIRIT & THE WOMEN OF THE O.T. – (3) RUTH

‘FITTING IN’ OR BEING YOURSELF ?

The book of Ruth is possibly one of the most popular parts of the O.T. This may have something to do with the fact that it is something of a love story... It might be also because it's a short book, with only three main characters. Fairly easy to read & fairly easy to follow, which can't be said for other parts of the O.T. in particular...!

The first thing to notice is that this book is called - not 'Naomi' but it's called 'Ruth'. From what we know of Naomi, we are probably not surprised. But we need to remember this: Firstly, Naomi is the Israelite woman of our story, whereas Ruth is a 'dodgy Moabite'. Naomi is the senior woman, & therefore held in higher regard in those days. Ruth, on the other hand, is 'traded' as property, with Naomi's husband's property, so she is clearly in a lower position than her mother-in-law. And more than that, the story begins with Naomi, seeking to make a new life for herself & her husband in Moab. And it ends with Naomi rejoicing over the grandson she treats as her own son. For all that, this outsider Ruth has the honour of having a book of the Bible named after her... So - something significant in the naming of this book. Something that echoes the challenging words of Jesus to the 'insiders' of the synagogue in Nazareth, in Luke 4... (And the words of Paul in 1 Cor: 'God chose the lowly things of the world to shame the proud'...).

[I wonder, how would your book in the Bible read, if there was one named after you...? Some of you have, of course, been named after Bible characters, but that's not the case for myself & Colin, for example, & many others here...].

Another thing which might strike us about this book. Bearing in mind what we have already learned from Deborah & Hannah - there is no song of victory on the lips of Ruth here. And there is no explicit mention of God's Holy Spirit. But we can be sure that God's Spirit was at work in the lives of Ruth & Naomi. God's Spirit led Naomi to return to her homeland. God's Spirit moved Ruth to stay with Naomi, come what may. God's Spirit prompted the love Boaz found growing in his heart, from the day he first met Ruth. God's Spirit was at work in all those who welcomed Naomi & Ruth back to Israel. It's not far wrong to see God's Spirit as God's 'secret agent', working unseen in the background of all

human history. Weaving a golden thread through each day. Weaving a pattern of love in each of our lives too.

But... had I tried to tell this to Naomi, earlier in this story, she would have scoffed in my face. Or just turned away in disgust. Naomi had lost her husband & both her sons in Moab, having previously fled from famine & death in Israel. Her multiple bereavements weighed upon her wherever she went, & made her feel she had no hope, no future.

I am reminded of the fate of many women from many nations, after the world wars of the last century. I have just finished reading this remarkable book, 'The Unknown Warrior' by John Nichol. One of the many pictures from this book which have stayed with me, is the picture of the 99 widows who were given particular seats of honour in Westminster Abbey. This was for the service in November 1920, when the body of the 'Unknown Warrior' was laid to rest in the Abbey. These 99 women were given 'front row seats' because they had lost their husband & **all their sons** in WW1. As Nichol comments: impossible to understand the depths of the grief of these women. So with Naomi.

When Naomi returned to her hometown of Bethlehem, she was greeted with excitement by those she had known previously. But she wanted to disown the name of 'Naomi', meaning 'pleasant'. Instead she protested that a better name for herself would be 'Mara', meaning 'bitterness'. Naomi spent many years in bitterness of heart. She felt that God had turned against her. She felt that God had afflicted her & made her return to Israel, feeling empty & alone. But she wasn't alone. And their return just happened to coincide with the start of the barley harvest there. The first note of hope in what starts as harrowing tale.

Naomi's faith was at an all-time low. But Naomi clearly had not reckoned on the steadfast love of her God. Nor on the steadfast love of Ruth. Nor on just how quickly Ruth would catch the eye of someone in Israel who just happened to be a possible 'kinsman-redeemer' for her & her family.

There are two ways of reading this tale. Two ways of reading Ruth's behaviour. Is Ruth too accommodating for her own good? As a Moabite, her chances of finding a husband in Israel were very low. Whereas, if she had turned back with her sister-in-law, Orpah, she would have been quite likely to have found another Moabite husband. Was Ruth acting like a doormat here, putting the needs of Naomi above her own? Did she 'bend over backwards' to fit into her

new surroundings, so much so that she was treated as 'goods & chattel'. Even her own son was not seen as her own! There might be an argument for applauding Ruth for her 'subservient' attitude. An argument which echoes those who argue that immigrants should do everything they can to 'assimilate' into their new homeland. Do everything they can to put their previous homeland behind them.

But there is much more to Ruth's character. She had a strength of character, a steadfastness (stickability?) which understood the cost of following Naomi's God. But I believe Ruth also had an inkling, somehow, that Naomi's God was the definition of 'steadfast'. God's 'secret agent' Spirit had been whispering to Ruth. This God was a God of deliverance. A redeeming God. A God who could 'restore the years the locust had stolen'... Perhaps Ruth was convinced of this from what she had seen in Naomi – before she lost her husband & both sons.

So this reading of the book of Ruth is not about celebrating immigrants 'blending in'. But it IS about Ruth 'standing out' as a remarkable character. She certainly stood out to Boaz, among all the other Israelite women he could have chosen. The real truth here, is that good character is recognised across barriers of language & culture. God's Spirit is at home in every people group & nation.

This is a reminder that today is a particular day of prayer for the work of BMS World Mission. Across this nation & across our world, Baptists are joining in prayer, to pray for a deeper understanding of how God is today reaching out across any boundaries of race, language & nationality. We will join in prayer for our world & our mission to God's world in a little while...

But let me first tell you another story. A story from Thailand, told in the latest BMS Magazine 'Engage'. It's about a teenager called Htoo Lee. He & his brother were on their bikes, taking tomatoes to sell at market. The police stopped him, because his riding was erratic. He was tested for drugs & arrested for riding his bike under the influence. (Drugs are a big deal in Thailand, as you know). His parents had to pay a large fine. When he got home, he expected to be punished. But instead his parents asked their Christian friends to come & pray with the family. As people were worshipping God, Htoo Lee felt a new & strange sensation. He felt a peace he didn't understand. When someone from his family asked him if he wanted to give his life to Jesus, he quickly said yes.

Very soon too, Htoo Lee was convinced that God was calling him to Christian ministry. So, he applied to a Bible College. At the interview he felt God prompting him to be completely honest about his past. So he told the panel about his drug-taking. And the college, sadly, turned down his application... But, being encouraged by others to apply to another college, he showed something of the steadfastness of Ruth. Again, he was very honest at his interview & expected to hear another refusal. But, praise God, this interview panel recognised that God's Spirit was graciously working to make him a new creation. And right now, Htoo Lee is training to be an evangelist - so he can return to the area where he grew up & share the good news of Jesus with the people he knows. Alleluia! And who knows, God may lead him on, to take the gospel of Jesus to another culture, another land. The God who began a good work in Htoo Lee's life will take it on to completion... How about us? How about our lives?... What will 'completion' or fullness look like for us?

What will it take for us to be honest with ourselves, honest with others, honest with God? It's impossible not to see the cost of following Jesus. But, like Ruth, can we also begin to see the blessings & benefits of going God's way wholeheartedly? Will we be as steadfast as Ruth was, in the face of bereavement, uncertainty & all kinds of hardship? We've heard the saying 'Fortune favours the brave'... But what about mis-fortune? Can we agree together that – with God's help – 'Misfortune spurs on the faithful'...?

We must finish with the picture we are left with at the end of the book of Ruth. Naomi, with a beaming smile on her face, coo-ing over her grand-son Obed... What a picture!... And those gathered round her: Ruth, Boaz, the elders & all the people. The elders proclaim a blessing over them: 'May you have standing & be famous in Bethlehem'. And the women there are also swept up with the spirit of this occasion. And **they** are nearer the mark. Here is a collective song of victory, inspired by God's Spirit:

'Praise be to the LORD, who THIS DAY has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer! May he become famous throughout Israel'... What a word of prophecy this is!. What a promise! Because Obed was father to Jesse, Jesse was father to King David. And who is in David's Bethlehem line but the King of Kings, Jesus... ! This One is the Bridegroom of God for all us & all creation. He is the One who is **our** kinsman-redeemer, famous throughout all the world. Jesus is the One who, as with Naomi & Ruth, 'renews our lives and sustains us'... PTL!

We have not been left alone. God has not left without a 'kinsman-redeemer'.
Thanks be to God!. Alleluia!