

# Ruth in Queensland

A Series of three bible studies given by Rt Revd Dr Jo Bailey Wells at northern and southern regional clergy conferences in the Diocese of South Queensland, August 2019

## Introduction

3 mornings on the book of Ruth.

The big picture from 30,000': a tiny self-contained book of 4 chapters that does and doesn't fit into the OT story of Israel. We'll revisit the misfit another day. But where (literally) does it fit? In the traditional Jewish ordering of the canon, Ruth follows Proverbs. Suggesting – I put to you – that the story of Ruth offers an outstanding exemplar of where Proverbs ended, with a celebration of the 'valorous woman' in that concluding poem that is too often described and far too easily dismissed as 'the good wife' (Prov 31:10-31).

And in the Christian bible, in the OT as we've come to know it, the book of Ruth follows Judges. When the book of Ruth is read immediately after Judges, it is evident that the two fit together as complementary opposites. Ruth is the still, small voice after the cataclysmic storm of Judges. In the wake of Judges' scenes of large-scale violence, deeply problematic national leadership, and moral deterioration of the whole people Israel, Ruth is a story of personal relationships that prove to be redemptive in the lives of a few ordinary people – yet ultimately point in the direction of hope for Israel as a whole. Uniquely in the Bible, this short story enables us to dwell for a season in the world of the Israelite family, in the small farming town of Bethlehem, just a few miles down the road from Jerusalem, where Ruth's great-grandson will one day be enthroned as a king. Ruth begins with the seemingly innocuous introduction, 'in the days when the judges were judging' (Ruth 1:1). And so, when you hear those words in a few moments, also feel their weight. The outward visible circumstances of our world, and the less visible more inward in this case domestic circumstances of God's prophetic working may not match. Arguably, the more hopeless the external horizon, the greater the fire in the belly of those willing to resist such circumstances – 'when the going gets tough the tough get going' – and the more hope-filled is the impact of their resistance.

OK, I want you to enter the story through a version borrowed here from the work of Ellen Davis and Margaret Adams Parker. Ellen Davis' own translation from the Hebrew alongside woodcuts by the American artist Margaret Adams Parker. Both of them committed to the text 'as it really is' (Matisse). So you will find here, I dare to hope, not the stock romantic tale, but elements you might recognise more readily from the nightly news: refugees and widows, the broken and the destitute, the foreigner.

You're going to what to look at the screen. So set down your phones with their bible app. Close your laptops. Be present here and now to enjoy the story. This powerpoint will be available on Google classroom if you want to find it later. And so will be the whole of my talks.

I'm going to take it slowly. I think that's crucial for reading the OT in any case. Don't listen for plot (you already know it!); listen for character, for relationships. Listen for what surprises you.

Goals –enjoy the story. Enjoy - to be 'with'. Getting inside it. Claim it – eat it, as Ezekiel might recommend as he chewed the scroll - so that we get the story inside us – and at the same time find ourselves inside it in some way...

[Powerpoint]

[Buzz: where do you find yourself in the story? What strikes you?]

Your own experience: Who knows what the future holds - surprising adventure - when you say Yes to God and cling on... [Philip Johnson, 'there are two kinds of people, those who say yes and those who say no. Those who say yes are rewarded by the adventure they find; those who say no are rewarded by the security they retain']

And so to Naomi, and Ruth. The kind of people who say Yes. And cling on. Which is the basis of the journey that transforms circumstances of Calamity into Adventure. At the risk of pointing out the obvious, it doesn't feel like 'adventure' when you're clinging on for dear life. And can you imagine what Ruth would have said: if anyone had said to her, a Moabite widow, 'you'll be great-grandmother to the King of Israel'. A joke. Pah. 'And you're the Queen of Sheba?'

Correctly understood this is not a romantic idyll: even if it ends on a note of tender joy and hope for the future, it's not a 'happy ever after'... there's no walking into the sunset, it's not carefree or as simple as that. It's a tale of suffering and loss, redeemed by steadfast faithfulness.

Here's how we're going to explore it these next 3 days. I'm going to borrow a lens from the apostle Paul in Romans 5:3-4:

*Suffering produces endurance;  
And endurance, character;  
And character, hope (Romans 5:3-4)*

## Talk 1: Suffering produces Endurance

The book begins with deadly threat and loss: there is famine in Bethlehem (literally, in Hebrew, 'House-of-bread' – the breadbasket for Jerusalem). The bread has run out. And so, as with the 65 million migrants we have in our world today – a number which has quadrupled in the last 10 years as people escape their beloved strife-torn homelands - [SLIDE] we learn of the migration of a family across the Jordan River to the high plains of Moab, bearing just the very few possessions they can carry. I know that for at least one or two of you here, this has been your experience, coming to Australia. And perhaps if it wasn't yours, it was for a forebear of yours.

But Moab itself is a place of death: a husband dies, and two young boys grow up, get married, and die, all within the space of about ten years and five verses. [SLIDE] '... And the woman was left, without her boys and without her husband' (Ruth 1:5). Regardless of their status as married adults, the lost sons are still 'boys' to the mother who birthed and reared them, and she is left 'empty' (1:21).

What is going to sustain them? In contrast to most of the narratives in the OT and in Torah (the first part) especially, this story doesn't foreground God's action and character as the key to deliverance from death. God never speaks, directly or through a heavenly being in this book; there are no signs and wonders. Indeed, only twice does the narrative voice report any divine action as established fact (1:6; 4:13). The characters experience God in the ways that most of us do – not through direct revelation but rather by inferring God's actions and attitudes on the basis of events good or bad.

And even then, only by looking backwards, only when you have the benefit of hindsight – which relies on the gift of survival.

After the death of the three men, Naomi judges that God, *Shaddai*, has ‘done [her] evil’ (1:21). Nevertheless, hearing that God has ‘visited his people to give them bread’ (1:6), Naomi responds actively. Whatever she may feel, her actions demonstrate hope, maybe even trust. She sets out on the dangerous wilderness journey back home to Bethlehem, accompanied by the two widowed ‘brides’ (*kallot*) – the evocative Hebrew term for daughters-in-law – in her household. Soon however, she tries to send them back:

‘Go on, go back, each of you to her own mother’s house, and may YHWH do *hesed* with you, as you have done with the dead and with me. May YHWH grant that you find respite, each woman in the house of her husband.’ She kissed them, and they lifted up their voice and wept. (Ruth 1:8-9) [SLIDE]

Now, just listen carefully to Naomi’s words. They are highly unconventional from the standpoint of ordinary Israelite thought. Did you hear how she honours these young Moabite women as practitioners of *hesed*? *Hesed* is the quality of mutual loyalty that in the Bible is considered to be a distinctly if not exclusively Israelite virtue, scarce though it may sometimes be. It is Israel’s God ‘YHWH’ who famously ‘abounds in *hesed* and faithfulness’ (Exodus 34:6)

In Torah, in Israel’s core ‘bible’, Moabite women are viewed as a threat to Israel’s own religious loyalty (cf. Num 25); Deuteronomy firmly forbids the entry of any Moabites into the covenant community of Israel. Yet Naomi implies that her Moabite ‘daughters’ (Ruth 1:11) are a model that even YHWH would do well to follow. You’d be entirely forgiven for assuming Naomi is either ignorant or a dangerous heretic. Either way, as a teacher or religious professional your instinct would be to suppress such a statement because these words are a strong subversion of Israelite religious exclusivism.

We can only wonder, but perhaps that’s why Naomi wants to travel alone. Once Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem, Ruth’s ethnicity will be noted by everyone.

And then we have the scene on the wilderness road which is a defining moment for all three women. Orpah, whose name means ‘back of the neck’, disappears from the story; she turns back at Naomi’s insistence, leaving her mother by marriage to return to the house of her birth – a respectable and difficult choice for a widow whose girlhood is behind her. By contrast, ‘Ruth *cleaved* to [Naomi]’ (Ruth 1:14). The verb (*davaq*) is the same one used in the creation story to describe a man leaving father and mother and attaching to his new wife (Gen 2:24). [SLIDE]

Ruth’s incomparable declaration of loyalty is often heard in the context of weddings:

Don’t press me to leave you... Where you go, I will go.... Your people are my people and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die.... (Ruth 1:16-17).

It’s a beautiful reading for a wedding, but don’t let that association blind you to the fact that the scene here is not so much tender as confrontational. No! [Stamp of feet].

Probably Ruth insists on going with Naomi because she knows the older woman could never make it back to Bethlehem on her own – and even if she somehow did, she couldn’t survive without Ruth’s strong body and hands, which will provide them with food gleaned from the fields.

Naomi’s only recorded response is silence:

When she saw that she was set on going with her, she gave up talking to her. (1:18).

Is Naomi moved beyond words? Perplexed by a younger woman's tenacity? Or is she frustrated and frightened, feeling the burden of this young life, now inextricably bound to her own? The silent women, walking thru the stark Judean wilderness on the way to Bethlehem, contrast sharply with those they will soon encounter: the 'buzzing' female population of the town. [SLIDE - the whole city abuzz with the arrival of 2 women].

Now, I've already challenged the idea that the book of Ruth is a nice romance, part of the OT along with Noah and Jonah suitable for children.

And so you find countless visual and literary artists portraying Ruth as a fetching figure 'amid the alien corn' (as John Keats puts it), attracting Boaz with her supposed beauty – even though that is never mentioned in the book. I'd like you to view this story as **a tragedy redeemed**. In that sense it is a miniature of the whole biblical story in both testaments. And in Scripture, tragedy, here and elsewhere, is redeemed in the most unlikely way: through the deliberate embrace of one's own vulnerability.

In her decision to accompany Naomi to Bethlehem, Ruth becomes in her own person not only a **widow** (because her husband has died) but also an **orphan** (having no father or other adult male in the household to protect her - and leaving her birth family to accompany Naomi) and a **sojourner** (not just a stranger away from home but what's more, a foreigner in a small rural town where a Moabite in particular would be viewed with suspicion). She embodies and embraces the three classic biblical categories of vulnerability, of those in need of protection within covenant community. You might even say she chooses this triple level of vulnerability, though of course Ruth might reply she had no choice left. Is she mad, choosing this path?

*I wonder what you do with your vulnerability. Have you ever chosen the path of vulnerability? Or at least embraced your vulnerability in the public arena? If so, what ensued? [talk at tables in a few moments]*

What ensues from Ruth's chosen path of vulnerability here is redemption. Ruth becomes the protector, the first of several 'vulnerable protectors' in this book.

I need to tread very cautiously in saying this, but there are ways in which suffering uniquely qualifies one to speak of God. Think of Job, the most obvious example. And here, a little more quietly and subtly, is Ruth. Then of course we come to Isaiah, and the middle section that culminates in the good news – the salvation – that is delivered by a servant, a suffering servant. And here in Isaiah 52 and 53 we readily recognise a prophecy concerning the Messiah, our Lord and Saviour Jesus.

Ruth underlines that the path of vulnerability leading to redemption, is not uniquely the path of Jesus but the pattern of faithful following for us all. When famine or death or disaster strikes, people of faith are those called to cling on. And equally, those who don't hide the struggle, or deny it, or shirk it. **It is in our vulnerability – vulnerability held by *hesed* - that others see the face of God.**

And Ruth here is our role-model. A model of resistance and determination and endurance. She says Yes to setting out on a journey that others would call fool-hardy, choosing vulnerability and risk. She's surrounded by profound loss yet she becomes the one to create a new community. Do you know anyone like that I wonder?

And it's her suffering that becomes her equipping. Which in turn becomes a shining story, a testimony to human *hesed* inspired by divine *hesed* and its power to transform.

I wonder who you know who is like Ruth? Who you know who is willing to own their vulnerability and voice their vulnerability and even choose vulnerability? To take a risk, unsure that it will work out. The opposite of being able to control and predict. And equally who you know who models that capacity to cling, her perseverance and endurance? Brene Brown would say they are connected...

TED talks on Vulnerability. People with a strong sense of love and belonging are those who have the courage to be who they are, to be imperfect. Willing to let go of who they thought they should be in order to embrace who they actually are, to that can embrace their vulnerability

Vulnerability is also the birth place of joy, creativity, longing, love

[Beware when vulnerability becomes manipulative, a status game... an end in itself. NB What is acceptable vulnerability and what isn't]

Turn Sam's questions to Ruth and Boaz... 'tell me where you're poor... Tell me where you're rich...'

## Talk 2: Endurance produces Character

According to *Midrash Rabbah*, the book of Ruth was written for one purpose only: 'to teach how great is the reward of those who do deeds of *hesed*'. It demonstrates the exact opposite of the trajectory of Judges: how human relationships characterised by mutual faithfulness sow seeds of hope in the midst of desperate situations.

[SLIDE] We focused yesterday on the desperation, on the depth of suffering of three women in the face of famine, death and destitution.

Ruth 1:9 – 'they lifted up their voice and they wept'. That's a very familiar biblical idiom for weeping aloud, full-bodied lament. And I just want to flag that in the Hebrew idiom, 'voice' is a singular noun. In English might render it, 'they lifted up their voices...' yet the singular designates how these three are joined together in their grief. The artist is every bit the sophisticated biblical commentator in depicting these 3 figures as a solid monolith of pain. The figures are barely indistinguishable one from another in their common agony. Tempted to entitle it a beautiful picture of d-v-q, cleaving, sticking with. Glue. 'cleavage'...

So, yesterday we focused on suffering and we talked about what sustains these folks in the midst of suffering, what enables them to endure – and that is *hesed*. *Hesed* that revolves around two core relationships: between Naomi and Ruth, and Ruth and Boaz. It's the key quality of both relationships, named 3x (Ruth 1:8 2:20; 3:10). It's the 'glue' of covenant relationship that makes possible cohesion, not just domestic, in the family but across society, within the community. And it's also theological cohesion, faithful 'discipleship', following God according to the commandments of the Torah, even when it stinks, even when it makes no sense, even when there's nothing to gain. If suffering produces endurance - on a good day - then endurance produces character. And character, at least in the book of Ruth, is all about *hesed*. Ruth cleaving to Naomi. Sticking by. Not giving up on. Cultivating glue... stickability (There, you can go now – that's really all I want to say this morning.).

It was a surprise to me to discover that there's no woman in the bible whose personal character is better revealed to us than Ruth, [SLIDE – with her big hands...] no woman in either Testament (including Mary of Nazareth) whose identity the narrator develops with such precision. It's a short book, and Scott may rename it the Book of Naomi if he likes: yet all four chapters are devoted to describing Ruth, describing her determination, her character, her actions – her *hesed*. Without Ruth there'd be no story. Now, let's unpack how Hebrew texts go about developing character. What you're getting here are my gleanings from an incredible Hebrew scholar called Robert Alter, a Jewish literary expert whose little paperback *The Art of Biblical Narrative* has probably taught me more about how to read the OT than anything else. He would say: 1) look at names; 2) look at speech – not least when it is sparse; 3) look for repetition – it's not accidental.

Hebrew names. Orpah's name, like Naomi's sons, describes her destiny. However reluctantly, she turns the back of her neck on Naomi. It's curious that Ruth's name is not transparent to meaning. There's a possible connection to the verbal root –r-w-h, 'saturate' – so one rabbinic explanation is that she is 'the one who fills to overflowing'. That makes some thematic sense – she is indeed one who fills Naomi's emptiness to overflowing. Yet the connection is obvious. More likely it is the significance of the fact that she has a name that *can't* easily be decoded – here is a clue to the complexity of her character. In this character is revealed through her actions. It's notable how little she speaks – only a very few times. Yet all the actions revolve around her initiatives. The text develops her sense of resolve over and over.

OK, explore what Ruth says.

1. Ruth's impassioned speech (1:16) beginning, 'Don't press me to leave you...' ends up being more about Ruth pressing Naomi to oblige. We see her passion and her tenacity – it is a declaration of love at the same time it says 'I'm adamant and my heels are dug in'. Don't bother pushing back... such that Naomi ends up lapsing into silence until (apparently) they reach Bethlehem where the whole community is abuzz. And they come across Boaz.
2. Next Ruth announces (2:2), 'So I'm going to go to the field and glean...' The phrasing communicates a tone of resolve. Determination would seem to be characteristic of her. Determination both to get food and to spare Naomi, whose strength and spirits have been exhausted by the journey.
3. Then – three times – the question comes up, And who is Ruth? Three times the question of her identity is posed by one of the people in the story – twice by Boaz and once by Naomi – and the answers given in the text are revealing of how others, and perhaps Ruth herself, come to understand who she is, the significance of her personal character, for their shared life. Hearing those answers requires careful listening to the words and language – it's the reason I suggested you need to read it slowly – because it's deceptively simple but beautifully crafted. That's where I want to pay attention this morning.

### First Question

At first, Ruth stands out in Bethlehem for the obvious reason that she is a stranger in a small town. [SLIDE] When Boaz sees among the gleaners in his field someone he does not know, he asks his overseer:

To whom does this worker-girl belong? (Ruth 2:5)

Not 'Who is she?' but 'Whose is she?' In the kinship-based culture of ancient Israel no one, least of all a woman, had social standing or identity independent of the family that provided whatever measure of protection might be offered the indigenous person.

Friend Toby's experience speaking on a hospital ward in Uganda: 'but you never told us who you are!' Toby who is now a priest and a preacher said, but you invited me to preach. That's not about me, it's about God'. He imagined they wanted to know where in England he was from, what brought him to Uganda but they said 'No. We want to know who are your people? How can we learn about God without learning who you are who claims to speak about God?' In a less literate world, it's a version of a CV. And, folks, it's clear that we are living in a less literate world. Millennials tell us they'll listen to our gospel when we've first demonstrated our authenticity. There's no automatic right to be heard any more – and trying to act as if there is will only rile people, and undermine our authenticity. That's where vulnerability comes in, wearing our hearts on our sleeves, being uncannily open as to who we are. My beloved grandmother – one of the most polite, proper, well-dressed, 'correct' people you could ever meet – would be utterly horrified.

'Whose is she?' asks Boaz.

And the field manager's response exposes the depth of Ruth's vulnerability:

She is a Moabite worker-girl, *the one who came back* with Naomi from the territory of Moab. She said, 'Please let me glean, and I will gather among the cut ears behind the harvesters.' And she came and stood from morning until now. There has been little of this sitting in the field-hut for her! (2:6-7).

This nameless Moabite 'came back,' for Naomi's sake, to a place she had never been, and she is working unstintingly to keep them both alive. Here Ruth stands for countless women throughout history and around the world who, thrown by circumstance into precarious situations, take on the additional risk and struggle of caring for the old or the young, the sick or the permanently frail. She's working hard – she's not even resting in the shelter where other workers take a break in the shade.

Boaz is quickly drawn to Ruth for the sake of her character, granting her special harvesting privileges and protection in his fields "stick by my worker-girls here' uses the same Hebrew word *davaq*, to cleave, repeating Ruth's exceptional loyalty is sticking by Naomi as we discussed yesterday). And that prompts Ruth's amazed question as she bows to the ground:

'Why have I found favour in your eyes, to recognise [*n-k-r*] me, when I am an 'unrecognisable' [ie foreigner; *n-k-r*] (Ruth 2:10).

Ruth is not one to take an act of grace for granted. Nothing about rights here. Her gesture along with this question expresses deep gratitude for Boaz's unexpected generosity and perhaps hints that she glimpses how God is at work through this man. If we don't pause and say thank you we stand no chance of recognising the hidden action of God in the events of our lives. And we glimpse how her words and character bring him to an expression of *hesed*. But I'm jumping ahead.

Did you hear a Hebrew pun based on that notion of recognising: the same root word, *n-k-r* is repeated. The language is underlining the significance of Boaz's action: he's crossed an important social boundary, between the native-born and the immigrant. From a position of power, he's taken an initiative to strengthen the position of the one who is culturally invisible, and the reason he gives is what he has learned of her character:

Certainly I have been told all that you did for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband, that you *left-behind your father and your mother and the land of your birth* and went to a people that you did not even know just a little while ago!' (Ruth 2:11)

This is another direct evocation of that prescription for marital commitment in Genesis that 'a man will leave-behind his father and his mother and cleave to his wife' (Gen 2:24).

And there's a further echo of Genesis. Ruth has left 'the land of [her] birth' as did Abraham and Sarah (cf Gen 12:1), to go to a completely unknown place. But what they did I might suggest was safe and secure compared to these circumstances. Because quite *unlike* Abraham and Sarah, Ruth hasn't acted in response to God's express call but rather on what might be seen as the less-certain ground of personal feeling, her own devotion to a woman who herself has declared that 'the hand of YHWH has struck out against [her]' (Ruth 1:13). What is it we have for our lectionary this Sunday from Hebrews 11: 'Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen'.

And (2:12) Boaz goes even further, quoting traditional religious language drawn from the Psalms to commend Ruth to God's keeping: 'under whose wings you have come to take shelter'. Direct quote from Psalm 91 and Psalm 37:8. Just take that prayer to heart for a moment because we'll come back to it.

The question of Ruth's identity is posed twice more, once more by Boaz and then on her return by the mother-in-law Naomi. We're moving into chapter 3 where I just want to jump in and look at one more interjection of direct speech from Ruth.

Naomi is directing Ruth to go down to the threshing floor that night. She's got some inside intel that Boaz will be there and gives her some very specific instructions [SLIDE 3:3]. Those instructions are actually termed 'command'. To which Ruth replies in 3:5, 'Everything that you say, I will do'. I wonder if you can hear here the echoes of Israel at Sinai, the mountain where God gives to Israel his covenant commands. And Israel eagerly replied, 'Everything that YHWH has spoken, we will do!' (Ex.19:8) – then promptly fail to do. Not so with Ruth: the next verse underlines this still further: 'and she did everything as her mother-in-law commanded her' – again, a near-quote of the foundational narrative in the Torah. So, it turns out, Ruth is not just commended for her steadfast love, hesed but also for her faithfulness. Remember Ex 34:6, YHWH is described as 'abounds in steadfast love and faithfulness' And here, this foreigner is described mirroring the character of the God of Israel better than any Israelite.

## Second Question

It happens during the second encounter between Boaz and Ruth, on the threshing floor.

It's dark, at best there's just moonlight. [SLIDE] Threshing floors were dark places... where people drank enough to feel good (3:7) and where there was at least some opportunity for rolling around in the hay, for uncensored sexual activity. For Ruth to approach Boaz there in the middle of the night, seeking a higher level of legal and economic protection for herself and Naomi, would be extremely risky, and totally countercultural. Misunderstanding or refusal would be ruinous for her reputation and therefore the livelihood of Ruth and Naomi's fragile household. Interpreters debate furiously how sexually aggressive Ruth may have been, but notice that's a point about which the text is pretty silent. That is, the text does not seem to encourage speculation. In that sense, the threshing floor *remains* a dark place. The narrator focuses only on the words that Boaz and Ruth exchange, and that is enough to disclose the woman's character more fully... to shed light in this dark place on the heart of this woman's resolve – shedding light for the reader, for Boaz and Naomi, maybe even for Ruth herself. Sometimes it's only when you're asked the question that your true motives are revealed – you don't know yourself what you're about before you have to explain yourself.

So – I wonder – where you've been asked, 'and who are you?' And what you answered? So much depends on context, doesn't it? 'A child of God'. 'A wife and the mother of two teenagers'. 'An OT professor'. 'A student and a volunteer teacher'. The butler to a cat who has rights, who is incapable of suggesting she's ever thankful to be fed. I tend to resist saying 'I'm a bishop' and here I realise why: not just because it raises more questions than it answers, but because it doesn't tell you very much about my character. [Many questions here: where's Dorking? What's a suffragan?...]

*Who are you? I wonder what circumstances come to mind where you've been asked that question... and what you answered*

'Who are you?' This is what Boaz asks when he starts awake in the night and discovers a woman lying 'at the place of his feet'. Last time she has no independent identity in his eyes – she must 'belong' to someone – a family, an employer. But now that has changed, according to the form of his question. Here, on the threshing floor – when, who knows, she is nearly naked - he asks Ruth to name her own identity, and Ruth says her name – the first time it is spoken in the book:

And she said, 'I am Ruth, your maidservant. You will spread your 'wing' over your maidservant, for you are a redeemer.' (Ruth 3:9)

Her reply is remarkable. She does not stop at naming herself. She goes on to confront Boaz with a thus-far neglected element of his own identity – that of redeemer. But first we see her bold initiative once again. Regardless of the fact that she describes herself as his maidservant, of their difference in social status, she goes on to give Boaz an instruction, to spread his wing, his clothing, over her which references the social and economic protection of marriage(cf. Ezek 16:8). If you like, you might see this as a marriage proposal – and from the maidservant! But the literary context also references back to where Boaz commended Ruth to God’s protection (2:12). So here in effect she’s suggesting that Boaz should now act on God’s behalf to make his prayer a reality, to answer his own prayer. She’s persuading Boaz to step up. She’s naming God’s call. She’s eliciting his rise to the challenge of ministry. And that ministry is about redemption.

‘You are a redeemer’ – more than the narrow legal context of sorting out land. ‘Redeemer’ is the way God is named in Israel by those whose situation is desperate, those for whom human help is insufficient. God redeems orphans (Prov 23), God redeems the psalmist’s life from the pit (103:4), God redeems the people from slavery in Egypt (Exod 15:13).

At the very least, Ruth is persuading Boaz to step in for God and step up, to act like God. She’s naming his call, and it’s a big one.

Meanwhile, after she gets up and off back in the morning, Boaz refers to Ruth – for the very first time in the book – as ‘woman’ (3:14) – no longer identified (as previously by herself and others), as worker-girl, daughter, servant-girl, maidservant, or Moabite. Here is another oblique answer, from Boaz himself, to his own question, ‘who are you?’

*[Plenary] And what did your answer reveal about your character? And what did it elicit from others about theirs?*

## **HESED**

According to *Midrash Rabbah*, the book of Ruth was written for one purpose only: ‘to teach how great is the reward of those who do deeds of *hesed*’.

What are deeds of *hesed*? And what is their reward? *Hesed* is the ground for endurance. It keeps us sailing in the same direction – Columbus, no land in sight, kept sailing. It keeps us persisting in doing good or speaking good when our deeds or our words are misinterpreted; and then – ideally - it prevents us from needing to retract them, doing nothing but apologising or defending ourselves in the face of misinterpretation when silence is the better part of valour. ‘This is a time for holding our nerve’.

In other circumstances *Hesed* provides us the firm footing, the still centre, the steadfast hold, the deep security, the clarity that is needed, with which to change our tack, to change our mind, to take a risk, to leave home, when the same old same old or digging in our heels would not be faithful or true.

Either way, *hesed* holds us in the storm. I’m speaking to myself. In 3 years as a bishop: hardest part is steering into the storm. Naming the elephants. Grasping nettles. Making disturbance my friend. In our world, in our church, even in our familial relationships: who else is going to do it? Who has the basis, the guts, the clarity, the strength not to steer around stuff? Fuel is God’s *hesed* which I’m still learning.

And such *hesed* transforms. Ultimately I'm absolutely clear it is God who transforms; but in a book like Ruth God does his transforming work of *hesed* through a person who mirrors divine *hesed*. It is Ruth whose words and deeds bring about transformation. The transformation of her circumstance, of Boaz's circumstance, of Naomi's circumstance, ultimately of Israel's circumstances. The *hesed* of one person; and one person who doesn't need to claim the credit.

William Temple: the church as the only organisation that exists for the benefit of its non-members. Then the logic of the call to minister in that organisation has to be, at the very least, that the ministry is not about me. (As sponsoring bishop: drives me crazy when people speak of 'my' call, 'my' ministry)

Ruth's *hesed* is all about Naomi. I put it to you that if Ruth's concern was about her own circumstances, she couldn't have done it. She had a higher calling. When you know your calling, you're equipped with a clarity that sees you through, that helps you step up and do remarkable things you might never otherwise have imagined. Eph 3:20-21: 'Now to him who by the power at work within us can do infinitely more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ forever and ever'.

## Talk 3: Character produces Hope

'Who are you?' is what Boaz asks when he starts awake in the night and discovers a woman lying 'at the place of his feet'. In her answer, Ruth says her name – the first time it is spoken in the book:

And he said, 'Blessed are you to YHWH, *my daughter*! You have done even more good with your latter act-of-good-faith [*hesed*] than with the former one, in not going after the young-men-in-their-prime, whether poor or rich. And now, *my daughter*, have no fear. *Everything you say, I will do* for you. Yes, the whole public assembly of my people knows that you are a valorous [*hayil*] woman.' (Ruth 3:9-11)

Ruth's answer, besides voicing her name for the first time in the book, is a directive, a statement of expectation. It stops just short of being an order; not an imperative but the future tense.

'I am Ruth, your maidservant. You will spread your 'wing' over your maidservant, for you are a redeemer.'

Ruth has used the future tense before: first in her insistent speech to Naomi on the road to Bethlehem: '... I will go... I will spend the night... I will die' (1:16-17). By speaking like this, Ruth opens up the possible, what was a previously unimaginable future; by means of 'imperfect' verb forms, she creates an alternative to a no-go problem.

### Third Question

The morning after the night before, Ruth returns to her mother-in-law, laden down with barley. When she is asked, the third time Ruth who she is. Yes, by her mother-in-law!

OK, literal recognition is clearly not the issue here. Ruth never answers the question directly (as though she were unrecognisable in the dark). Rather, she tells Naomi what happened in the hours since she left home – events that have made her, in some sense, unrecognisable to Naomi. Even though she was following her mother-in-law's instructions, her actions have brought Ruth fully into an independent identity. In taking the risk of humiliation and the loss of reputation at the threshing floor, she found the most profound regard. She secured a future for herself and her mother-in-law. Ruth is now a 'woman' (3:14) in her own right.

The literary art is magnificent in this third repetition of a question about Ruth's identity. In the previous instances, it was an obvious question to ask, though not without significance. But just because the question is not obvious here, it makes us consider what we now know about who Ruth is. Above all, she's characterised by multiple 'acts of good-faith' (*hesed*). Now that we see her as a woman who is independent, bold and even physically strong, we can better understand what such *hesed* means in a *human* life. It is what brings humans to one another and to God. And in Ruth we see that the perfect practice of *hesed* requires strength so that one can bind oneself freely to others – not primarily out of abject need, but out of generous love. [Thus vulnerability is a STRONG thing to offer; not a weakness].

Sam and Scott have been talking about scarcity and abundance. And I've described the circumstances surrounding Ruth in terms of scarcity. Yet what she offers is abundance. She is surely one of the best demonstrations of how God gives us everything we need to follow him, indeed, in abundance. She's insistent about that, just as she is with every other kind of goodness. And that abundance transforms the outlook for everyone around her. Suffering produces endurance, endurance character, and character Hope.

[Martha Deng in Renk – example of where one character can transform a situation, a whole community. Like a pack of cards, one can bring about a whole-scale reversal...]

Takes a clear act of courage. Brene Brown: ‘Courage is contagious. Every time we choose courage, we make everyone around us a little better and the world a little braver.’

That’s what we see displayed in Ruth: one great commentator, Zornberg, supposes that is what moves Boaz to call her a ‘valorous’ or ‘powerful’ woman. As I see it, a major piece of Ruth’s own power is that she can speak of her own death as an eventuality; yet she’s not daunted by that threat.

Ron Rolheiser, *Sacred Fire: A vision for a deeper human and spiritual maturity* – levels of discipleship (getting our life together; giving our life away; giving our death away) – ultimately giving away one’s death.

Zornberg comments: ‘There is a narrow opening which the person of... strength, vitality and courage can find if she feels strongly enough both the closure of and the necessity for life.’ So, not just courage but selflessness. ‘Life’ is not about *her* life.

Trinity Wall St priest during 9-11 w pre-school children, leading them two-by-two away from the wreckage. ‘Everything’s going to be alright’. ‘I lied’.... And no way she could have done that if she didn’t have responsibility for others, for 25 little ones to lead to a place of safety.

**True leadership:** seeing beyond what is practicable or expedient; making possible what is otherwise impossible; raising horizons so people do what they previously would never have managed or risked – not just Ruth but also Boaz; Moses with Pharaoh; Churchill at the Darkest Hour; and, I pray, Welby at Lambeth 2020???

Esther, ‘for such a time as this.’ But Ruth didn’t have a great deal of preparation time. Living on our toes. The practices of a lifetime. Virtue ethics.

The implication is that Boaz will ‘spread his wing’ of legal protection within the context of marriage. Now, he could have turned around and said, ‘I’m not gonna be bossed around by a worker, by a Moabite’ but he receives her directive as an act of *hesed* toward himself... one that surpasses even Ruth’s selfless devotion to Naomi. Ruth doesn’t go after the ‘young-men-in-their-prime’ but returns instead to Boaz, who is surely well past it himself. Naming her as a woman of *hayil* he unwittingly identifies her as his own perfect match; the same word is used to introduce Boaz into the story, as *ish gibbor hayil* (2:1), ‘a man of great substance’. That might denote both strength of character and in this context also substantial economic means. We find this man of substance strangely solitary – lacking no comfort but that of love. Then on the threshing floor, he finds himself unexpectedly in emotional debt to the woman who asks him to marry her. And so Boaz becomes, like Ruth herself, (and at the invitation of Ruth) a vulnerable protector.

*Brother, sister, let me serve you...*

Considered as a reflection on *hesed*, the story of Ruth reveals an aspect of covenant commitment that might not otherwise be clear, although many parts of the Bible point toward it: the real test of covenant relationship is *how one vulnerable person treats another* who is likewise vulnerable.

This is an emblematic story, and so I suggest our understanding of the vulnerable protector should extend beyond Ruth the Moabite... not least, who, as great-grandmother of David and thus Mother of the Messiah, necessarily stands for more than herself. Her story might suggest how one vulnerable people or nation under threat takes the risk of recognizing its kinship with another vulnerable, beleaguered people.

[East Germany after the war?]; Congo taking in refugees from Rwanda; Northern Uganda taking in refugees from South Sudan. *Hesed* as mutual risk-taking among the vulnerable.

[the absolute counter to the reflex/temptation for abusers to abuse?]

Turn to John's Gospel, with its many reflections on the Hebrew Scriptures: I wonder if you might think it appropriate to imagine that when Jesus commands his hated and persecuted disciples to 'abide in love' (*agape*) - that state of enduring commitment to Jesus and each other (John 15:4-13) - he's building on an understanding of *hesed* as the practice of mutual risk-taking among the vulnerable. *Agape* is a mode of self-giving in community that ultimately derives from what Jesus has 'heard from [his] Father' (15:15); so, the love commandment accords with the teaching in Israel's Scriptures that YHWH is the greatest Practitioner of *hesed* (eg Pss 90:14; 103:8, 11, 17).

The book of Judges ends with deception, false piety, death, and violence; the most graphic stories depict the abduction, rape, death, and even dismemberment of women (Jg 19-21) – and with that, the dismemberment of the people Israel. In sharp contrast, the book of Ruth, centering so much on the creative acts of women, ends with birth, not death – a baby named and nurtured in the company of women:

Naomi took the child and held him to her body, and she became his care-taker. The women of the neighbourhood gave him a name, saying, 'A son is born for Naomi,' and they named him Obed. He is the father of Jesse, the father of David (Ruth 4:16-17).

**Conclusion:** The Bible doesn't ignore the political dimensions of life. It takes them seriously (think of the books of Samuel and Kings, and the Prophets), but it reminds us that they're not ultimate.

Nor are they the place where (in most cases) full humanity is most fully realized.

In contrast to the book of Judges, which is mostly about public figures, self-absorbed political and religious leaders who send Israel into a downward spiral, the little book of Ruth reverses the trajectory of history, reinstating and renewing God's redemptive story of covenant loyalty demonstrated among ordinary people

Yet politics is not a completely separate sphere of existence; it is out of the family of Ruth that the royal house of David is born. Ruth is "the mother of the Messiah." The house of David is of course wracked with much human evil and trouble, and yet the biblical tradition in both Testaments never gives up hope of redemption coming from it.

*Who are the Ruths in your world? And the Boazes? Where are you?*

And a reminder, as with much of the OT, it's a story. I don't mean by that that it's fictitious, but that it's a narrative. Not a doctrinal statement; thus not about extracting timeless truths, index card bullet points. But engaging, relating.

### **More about Moabites... Anticipating a possible discussion on divisive issues in scriptural interpretation**

How should Israel relate to Moab? They are one of Israel's neighbours, the Moabites –should they, or should they not, be allowed to become part of Israel? On the one hand, the book of Deuteronomy is abundantly clear:

No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD, because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you.... You shall never promote their welfare [shalom, “peace”] or their prosperity [tovah “wellbeing”, “good things”] as long as you live [kol-yameka le’olam, “for all your days, in perpetuity”]. (Deut. 23:3-4,6 [Heb.4-5,7])

This is hardly ambiguous. Not only are Moabites to be excluded from Israel, but Israel is explicitly under no obligation ever to do anything positive on their behalf.

The book of Ruth, on the other hand, is equally clear. Ruth is from the land of Moab, and is regularly designated “the Moabite” in the course of the narrative. Yet when she comes with her mother-in-law Naomi from Moab to Bethlehem, Boaz not only shows kindness to her but he also eventually marries her. Through their union Ruth becomes the great grandmother of King David. She thus becomes a key figure in Israel's story.

**Deuteronomy legislates:** No Moabites should belong to Israel, and Israel should not promote Moabite welfare. **The book of Ruth narrates:** Boaz acts kindly towards Ruth the Moabite, and he brings her into a central role within Israel. How best should this be understood and handled?

The historical origins of, and relationship between, the two books, Deuteronomy and Ruth, can be, and have been, argued any which way. Which was written first? Does the writer of either know the other? We simply do not know. On any reckoning, however, the presence of two such different voices within Israel's scriptures suggests that the relationship between Israel and Moab was a divisive issue in ancient Israel for at least some people at some time. If our approach is to read Deuteronomy and Ruth as adjacent canonical documents, how best might we discern how to handle their different stances over Moabites?

Deuteronomy has a strong vision of Israel as the elect and holy covenant people of the LORD, and much of its content feeds importantly into both Jewish and Christian faiths: Deuteronomy contains the Shema, that commandment which Jesus designates as “greatest” and “first”. We may note, however, that the paragraph about Moabites is not related to core concerns such as election and holiness. Indeed, the grounding for the prohibition of Moabite admission to Israel is the Moabite failure to provide Israel with food and water when they had left Egypt and the hiring of Balaam to curse Israel. Even if this represents Moabite malice towards Israel, the punishment reads strangely. First, it seems disproportionate to the crime (and puzzling in the first place, since Deuteronomy 2:28-29 says that the Moabites *did* give the Israelites food and water). Why should all generations of Moabites be punished for the delinquencies of one generation of their ancestors? Secondly, the prohibition of seeking Moabite welfare or prosperity (wording whose force is weakened somewhat if, as is sometimes proposed, this is taken to be an idiomatic way of prohibiting the making of a treaty—though this is doubtful) essentially tells Israel to respond to the

Moabites in kind: hostility is to be met with hostility. On both grounds, this paragraph is hardly a highpoint in Deuteronomy's own moral vision, never mind that of the Old Testament as a whole. The story of Ruth has a different tenor. Most famous are Ruth's words to Naomi, when Naomi is returning to Bethlehem as a bitter woman after her bereavements in Moab:

But Ruth said, "Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following 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 –there will I be buried. May the LORD do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!" (Ruth 1:16-17)

Ruth's commitment to Naomi is unreserved, even though, as Naomi has just pointed out in the preceding dialogue, Naomi has little or nothing to offer her. Ruth's self-giving commitment to Naomi means a commitment also to Naomi's land and people and deity. This self-giving generosity is the very thing that Boaz notices and commends, that motivates his own generosity towards Ruth, and that he looks to the LORD to repay in kind (2:8-12) – which duly happens in his own acting as next-of-kin and marrying Ruth. Ruth thereby comes into the heart of Israel's story. Her own particular story suggests an understanding along the lines of "Blessed are the generous-hearted, for they shall find the true God". It is a story about the triumph of *hesed*, "loving-kindness", a prime characteristic of the LORD Himself (Exod. 34:6-7), which should characterize also those who respond truly to Him (see e.g. Ps. 111, the qualities of the LORD, alongside Ps. 112, the qualities of those who fear the LORD; the two psalms are a complementary pair of acrostic poems).

**In other words, the book of Ruth stands closer to the moral and spiritual heart of the Old Testament, and of the faiths rooted in it, than does the paragraph in Deuteronomy 23:3-6. The judgment that Christians should privilege Ruth over the paragraph in Deuteronomy looks to be in line with the priorities of the Old Testament itself, never mind that of the New Testament. For our purposes it illustrates how moral and spiritual judgment in relation to the content of Scripture might responsibly be used. The priority of love (*hesed*) can serve to relativize the significance of an injunction to hostility.**