

Loving sacrifices of little people can shape history in extraordinary ways.

Rev'd Peter Balabanski

Pentecost + 24b – Ruth 4 – Mark 12

We've just heard the joyful end of a love story. But Ruth and Naomi's story had some tragic moments along the way. It starts and finishes near Bethlehem. Naomi, her husband and their two sons go to Moab across the Jordan to escape a famine. But Naomi's husband dies. She manages to marry her two sons to Moabite women; Orpah and Ruth so they're all safely connected with extended family networks. But ten years on, tragedy strikes again. Both of Naomi's sons die. Now there are three childless widows left to grieve together. Where can they turn?

Naomi hears that the famine in Judah has ended, and so she sets out to travel home. She tells her daughters-in-law to go back to their family homes and try to re-marry. Reluctantly, Orpah does leave her. But Ruth clings to Naomi and says: *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.*

Utter commitment; Ruth takes a great risk going with Naomi. Like Abraham, she leaves country, kindred and ancestral home to go somewhere unknown. She does it because she loves Naomi; she's determined to care for her. So they travel to Bethlehem together. They arrive at the beginning of the barley harvest. To support Naomi and herself, Ruth goes straight to the fields to glean; to gather stalks of grain that the reapers have missed. If she's lucky, she'll strike somebody kind. Hebrew Law required reapers to leave something for the poor (Lev 19, Deut

²⁴⁾. Not everyone did this, but Ruth found plenty to gather because she struck kind, Godly people.

We find out why they are like this when we first meet the land-owner, Boaz. He and his reapers greet each other respectfully in God's name when he arrives. Boaz is the head of a decent, caring household. And as it happens, Boaz is a close relative of Naomi's late husband. ^{Ruth 2.1} He's exceptionally kind to Ruth. He says he's heard of her loyalty to Naomi, and he takes Ruth under his wing.

That evening, Ruth finally staggers back to town carrying about fifteen kilos of barley. She's thoroughly quizzed by Naomi about her extraordinary day. As Naomi hears about Boaz's gracious care – particularly his willingness to go beyond the requirements of the Law – she begins to see a chance for Ruth.

Hebrew Law calls upon a man to marry his brother's childless widow so she might have children to inherit her husband's property. ^(Deut 25, Gen 38) Naomi thinks Boaz might just go beyond the call of duty and, even though he's not a brother, he might marry Ruth anyway.

So as we heard today, Naomi got Ruth to wash and anoint herself, put on her best clothes and head straight back to the farm. She was to seek out Boaz at the threshing floor that night and wait until he'd gone to sleep. This is where the adults only bit begins, so we cut a long story short. Ruth effectively proposes marriage. Boaz is rather pleased but says there's a possible snag. There is another, even closer relative of her father's. But he'll see what he can do. Before dawn, he sends Ruth back to Naomi with a gift of so much grain that it takes a donkey to carry it. Seeing this, Naomi becomes quietly confident.

Boaz heads up to the town gate and the first person he meets there is that other relative. They negotiate the matter in the

presence of the gathered elders.

Boaz puts it very cleverly. He makes sure that relative realises that he may claim Ruth's father's property, but that if either Boaz or the relative marry Ruth and she bears a son, the son will eventually get the property back. Not only that; Ruth's son will also have a part-claim on the relative's estate. That's something the relative won't risk that, so before the elders, he takes off a sandal and hands it to Boaz; a gesture which in Hebrew Law says – *She's all yours*.

And as we heard, Ruth and Boaz would become the great grandparents of King David. The graciousness of a destitute widow and the decency of a good-hearted farmer are pivotal in the history of God and humanity. The book of Ruth is traditionally read in Synagogues at the feast of Shavuot – the anniversary of the giving of the Law at Mt Sinai. Ruth's journey from Moab to Bethlehem is seen as an allegory of the people who left Egypt and went to Mt Sinai to receive the Torah.

Ruth's story, and the Gospel story of the generosity of that poor widow who Jesus sees in the temple, tell us that the loving sacrifices of little people are noticed by God. And by God's grace, they can shape history in extraordinary ways. In this time where climate change and pandemic weigh so heavily on the poorest and most vulnerable of the Earth community, we should be encouraged to act on our kind, generous impulses to support them. I suspect that it will be one of the poorest of the poor who does something – acts in some way, gives in some way – and God will use their gift to transform history again; that's my prayer; we should be encouraged as big people in a big wheel – because we have no idea what God might make of our sacrifices. Amen