

Judges 18:1-12.27-31; Ruth 1:1-22

Today we begin a four-week series on the short Book of Ruth. It's many people's favourite story in the Bible, it reads well, it's got a feel-good factor about it. And yet it is so relevant because it is challenging for us in the 21st century. It's a story of migration – first of Naomi and her husband to Moab, then of Ruth to Israel. So many around the world migrate for various reasons – be it hunger, war or lack of opportunities like in my case where as a woman I couldn't be ordained in Poland so to follow my calling I had to leave my family and friends. So many in our world are bothered by the mass migration of peoples though – we hear dreadful stories coming out from the US on its border with Mexico. Migration was apparently one of the most important reasons people here in the UK voted to leave the EU – they didn't want any more migrants coming in to this country. Ruth's is a good story then for our times.

Let's look at the characters in today's passage first. Naomi, her husband and their two sons were hungry so they decided to leave the familiarity of the home turf and moved to Moab. Moabites and Israelites were always enemies so it must have taken a lot of courage to move there of all places. Nehemiah 13:1-3 describes some of Nehemiah's reforms after the return from exile and says: 'On that day the Book of Moses was read aloud in the hearing of the people and there it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever be admitted into the assembly of God, because they had not met the Israelites with food and water but had hired Balaam to call a curse down on them. (Our God, however, turned the curse into a blessing.) When the people heard this law, they excluded from Israel all who were of foreign descent.'

The Balaam story refers to the time when the Israelites left Egypt and were wandering in the desert. They fought with many a nation as others were afraid of having the Israelites pass through their territories. Moabites were afraid of them too and wanted Balaam to curse them but he wouldn't go against God's blessing upon them and didn't do it.

In any case the enmity was long standing and the offences remembered and revenged in every new generation over and over.

To begin with Naomi's family's move had been successful. Their sons found wives among the Moabites and they became accepted members of the new community. However disaster struck pretty quickly. Naomi's husband died shortly after they arrived and settled. She still had two sons and grandchildren to look forward to. Except that grandchildren never came. For some reason neither couple could have children. Even for us today it would be very sad. But then it was a tragedy. In their old age there would be no one to provide for them. There weren't social services and home helps in those days. One had to rely on one's own descendants to provide for you when you couldn't look after yourself. To top it off, because none of her sons had children, the whole family line would die with their demise. You might remember how desperate Abraham was to have children, so much so that he decided to have a son with his servant Hagar instead of waiting for the fulfilment of this long-time-in-coming promise of a son of his wife's,

Isaac. He felt he had to do something to ensure the survival of his line, it was of first importance to him.

All hope for a descendant dies when the two brothers die. That was the ultimate blow. All hope died with them. There was nothing else to look forward to. Naomi, crushed by her life experiences, decides to go back home. Originally she sets off with her two daughters-in-law but then tries to convince them to return to their own homes. We don't quite know the reasons for it – maybe she didn't want to burden them with looking after her, maybe she didn't want to be burdened with looking after them. It was easier to part ways and try luck separately. Maybe she wasn't sure how they would be received back in Israel – they were reviled Moabites after all. Maybe she feared she would be embarrassed by the association. Maybe she wanted to spare them potential heartache. Maybe it was a combination of all of the above and more. In any case she tried to persuade them to turn back. Orpah eventually did but Ruth wouldn't.

Now the word 'ruthless' comes from the root word 'ruth'. 'Ruth' means kindness and originates in this very story of the kind Moabite woman who selflessly decided to tie her destiny to her mother-in-law's. She utters those beautiful words which we often hear at weddings: 'Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried.' It might come as a surprise to many that those words were uttered first by one much younger woman to another. The sentiment is the same as in a marriage though – a selfless joining of destinies out of love.

How do we receive another, a stranger, a foreigner in our midst? I must say that by and large I have been received very well. Only occasionally there is an undercurrent of xenophobia when people hear I'm from Poland first before knowing anything else about me. Some frown, some ignore me. Until they hear I'm a minister – then they're my best friend! I would think anyone deserves the same treatment, regardless of what they do and where they come from but there you are. Thankfully it doesn't happen often and again, by and large I've been received very well which I'm really grateful for.

But not everybody is as lucky as I was. Here are three stories from Amnesty International: 'One couple were told by a UK judge they could receive protection in the UK, but they would have to leave behind two of their four children in war torn Libya, because they were over 18. Another couple from Homs, Syria, now living in Abergavenny, are desperate to be reunited with their daughter, who is now living on the streets in Lebanon with her then five-year-old son. One 15-year-old, who escaped to the UK after being recruited by the Syrian army, worked in McDonald's to raise the \$3000 it would cost his mother to make the dangerous journey to join him; as he had no legal alternative due to his age.'¹

What are we so afraid of? We're afraid because there are people who abuse our hospitality. The story from the Book of Judges is one such story of migrants who abuse their hosts and destroy – ruthlessly – the village of Laish. Yes, it does happen. And so we

¹ <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/actions/home-secretary-reunite-refugee-families>.

are afraid. I wonder how often we forego the blessing of welcoming someone who in turn could become a blessing to the community if, in fear, we extend blanket rejection to everyone. Ruth became a valued member of her community (more on this in the coming weeks) and a blessing to generations to come – her great grandson David was the king who brought security to his community and Ruth’s descendant Joseph was a step-father to Jesus. Reciprocating love and welcome in that case paid off in a big way – so big that we are still blessed by it thousands of years later.

In a study article entitled ‘Ruth: Resident Alien with a Face’ we read: ‘Genuine “Ruths” among us are crucial to our well-being as God’s people. God “has a habit of redeeming anyone who wants to channel his ‘covenant love,’ regardless of status or bloodline or standard of living,” writes Moore. “God takes great delight in bringing ‘Ruths’ among us. They channel his grace in ways no one else can.”’²

The choice is ours. It’s always ours. We can give in to fear and close our hearts and our communities or we can live in faith, risk vulnerability and open ourselves to a blessing of God channelled through a stranger in our midst. Amen.

² Ruth: Resident Alien with a Face, Christian Reflection. A Series in Faith and Ethics, p. 4.