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**Naomi (Ruth 1: 1-5)**

*Pentecost III*

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Each year at Benedictus, it's been our custom to have at least one series of reflections focused on a book from the Hebrew Scriptures – the Old Testament. This year, the lectionary directs us to read (among other things) the short and beautiful book of Ruth – and so for the next four weeks, I'd like to invite you to join in a reading of this subtle and well-loved story – one of only two books in the whole Hebrew bible to bear the name of a woman. Esther is the other.

So let's begin with a bit of context. Many of you will know that the books of the Hebrew bible are divided by scholars into three main categories. There's the Torah which is comprised of the first five books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy). These books constitute the foundational narrative of the people of Israel and set out the Law handed down to Moses from God. In the Jewish tradition, these are the books received as having the highest scriptural authority. Next there's the category of the Prophets – and this comprises eight 'books' divided into two groups: the four books of the Former Prophets (Judges, Joshua, Samuel and Kings), and the four books of the Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and what's called 'the book of the 12' which is a single scroll containing the writings of the 'minor prophets'. This is where you'll find Amos, Micah, Hosea, Jonah, Joel and all the ones beginning with 'Z' that you've never heard of and can't find when you're asked to read in church)!

Finally, there's the category called 'the Writings' which comprises, as biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann puts it, 'a more or less miscellaneous collection of eleven books'. These include the three great poetic books of the Psalms, Job and Proverbs; a set of revisionist historical texts – Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah; a

single apocalyptic scroll – Daniel; and the collection called the ‘five scrolls’ – Ruth, Esther, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations and the Song of Solomon.<sup>1</sup> The history and process by which these books, these Writings, came to be regarded as canonical – that is, as having the status of Scripture in the Jewish tradition – isn’t fully known. A noteworthy feature of this collection, however, is that they give voice to a range of theological understandings and interpretations. They don’t offer just a single monolithic party line, but in various ways they grapple with how to imagine God and human life in relation to God. They engage both with the older traditions of the Torah and the Prophets, *and* with lived experience – with the vast range of social and cultural contexts in which Jewish people in different communities and places sought to live out their lives, to understand and respond to suffering, and learn what justice, community and faithfulness really amount to.<sup>2</sup>

So that’s where the book of Ruth fits and the first thing we must understand about it is that (like the book of Job) it’s a *story*, a work of literary fiction. The Christian tradition has sometimes implied otherwise, and tended to read it historically. The story is set ‘in the days when the judges ruled’, it tells us, and in our bibles, Ruth is placed immediately after the book of Judges – as if in chronological sequence. But – as we’ve seen – in the Hebrew tradition, that’s not where the scroll is located. Its interest for us, it seems to me, is not to do with some spurious attribution of historicity or facticity, but with how it communicates truth of a different kind about the life of faith. In particular, what it means to practise faith, to be faithful, when the means of access to daily bread are precarious and fortunes may be reversed in the blink of an eye.

Gather round, then. Let me tell you a story. Once upon a time, in the days when the judges ruled, ‘there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), p.5.

<sup>2</sup> See Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp.271-276.

sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion'. Well, even on the surface, this is a pregnant beginning ... the plot is activated by a circumstance of crisis or at least of threat. There's a famine in the land, and this leads 'a certain man' (at this point we might mistakenly assume he'll be the hero of the tale) to remove his family, his wife and two sons, to a foreign place, the country of Moab. They're introduced in the story as economic refugees if you like, and will be vulnerable to all that new migrants are – differences in ethnicity and culture, lack of social networks and support, starting again from nothing.

Reading with the help of a commentary, we learn that the sense of threat and dislocation imbued in these few lines is even deeper. Bethlehem – their home place – means 'House of Bread' and famine is unusual, as seems the unexplained decision to move as a rather vulnerable single family unit to the land of Moab. According to the biblical tradition, the Moabites were descendants of Lot and the relationship between them and the people of Israel had been mixed. Early in the time of the judges, for example, King Eglon of Moab had defeated the Israelites and enslaved them for 18 years (Judges 3: 12-14). In this context, the story's mention of migration to Moab feels like a narrative 'uh oh' .... Is this really the right move, is it wise? What's more, the names of the two sons also seem to presage disaster – Mahlon is linked (apparently) to a root meaning 'sickness' and Chilion signifies something like 'failing', 'pining' or even 'annihilation'.<sup>3</sup>

And sure enough, trouble comes. First Elimelech, the husband of Naomi and the initiator of their exile, dies. This is bad – but unlike the story of Job, the catastrophe isn't total at this point. Naomi's two sons are left to her and they grow up to take wives of their own, nice Moabite girls – Orpah and Ruth. From Naomi's point of view, a future, including an economic future, is still viable. But ten years pass with no mention of grandchildren, no next generation emerging, and then the axe

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<sup>3</sup> David Atkinson, *The Wings of Refuge: The Meaning of Ruth* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983), p.35.

really falls. Mahlon and Chilion also die, 'so that the woman [Naomi] was left without her two sons and her husband'.

As a piece of writing, this opening of the book of Ruth seems to me masterful. With extraordinary economy and precision, these first five verses set the context and precipitate the action of the whole rest of the story. And the context, we're to understand, is of the deepest possible vulnerability. For women in the ancient world (and still in many places today), widowhood meant the loss of all social status and any assured means of support or protection. Naomi had seemed secure – she'd had a nice little nest egg laid up – not only a husband, but an heir and a spare. But now... 'Call me no longer Naomi, [which means pleasant or delightful]' she says a few verses later; rather, 'call me Mara [which means bitterness] ... I went away full, but ... have come back empty'. Quite apart from her grief at the loss of her husband and children, Naomi's superannuation has just evaporated – and there's no possibility now of making it up, for it's too late to marry again and have more children (Ruth 1: 12). And of course, in Moab her widowhood is compounded by her foreignness, which means the absence of larger networks of kinship and belonging to which she might appeal. What on earth will be possible from here? Like I said, it's a masterful beginning and sets up the framework for a gripping yarn.

It seems to me that there's one more thing worth noting. As a piece of Scripture, what I find striking about this opening of the book of Ruth is the absence of the voice, the agency of God. In fact, God doesn't appear overtly at all. The text does not say that 'God caused there to be a famine in the land' but just that 'there was a famine in the land'. God does not send Elimelech and his family to Moab, but apparently they just decide to move. Nor does God smite Naomi's men-folk, or make a wager with the devil, or decide to test her faith – they just die and she's left to deal with the consequences.

And isn't it like that in much of our lives? Things don't usually happen to us as if overtly, explicitly 'from the hands of God', nor are events labelled as directing us clearly to the path of godly or ungodly living, fruitful or unfruitful choices. Things just

happen, for good and ill, and we have to discern their meaning, discern our responses and live with our choices ... God comes to us, some have said, 'cleverly disguised as our life' – but what that means, and how we discover faithfulness in the midst – well, that's the tricky bit. How did the character of Naomi go about it and what might we learn from her? Well, dear listeners, that's part of next week's episode. Stay tuned!