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**Ruth (Ruth 1: 6-18)**

*Pentecost IV*

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We left Naomi last week in a parlous state. Her husband, Elimelech, and her two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, have died and she, a resident alien in the land of Moab, finds herself in a profoundly vulnerable position. Not surprisingly, her thoughts turn to her own country and her former community, and when she hears that the famine that had driven her family to migrate from Judah to Moab has passed, and that ‘the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them’, she decides to return home. And it’s at this point in the story that we start to get a sense of the character and calibre of Naomi’s Moabite daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, and of the deep bonds of love between these grieving women.

When Naomi begins her return, her two daughters-in-law set out with her. But then she seems to realise that if they come with her to Judah, they’ll be as vulnerable there as she is in Moab – not only widowed, but now themselves resident aliens. So she tells them to turn back and return to their families of origin, to their mothers’ homes. She prays they might remarry and ‘find security, each of you in the house of your husband’. The girls weep aloud when she kisses them goodbye, and protest her instruction: ‘No, we will return with you to your people’, they say. But Naomi insists. ‘Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands?’ And here, Naomi refers to the practice of levirate marriage – common in many ancient societies, including ancient Israel – where the brother of a deceased man is obliged to marry his brother’s widow, to give her support

and beget children on his brother's behalf. Naomi is saying that she has no more sons who might marry Orpah and Ruth. They need to seek their future elsewhere.

There's great tenderness in this scene, and profound mutual generosity. In bidding her daughters-in-law go, Naomi prays that 'the Lord will deal kindly with you as you have dealt with the dead and with me'. The word 'kindly' here translates the Hebrew word '*hesed*' which is 'the great word at the centre of God's covenant relationship with his people'.<sup>1</sup> It means loving kindness or steadfast love. It's a generous prayer, especially since Naomi has a bitter sense that the Lord has not dealt kindly with her. Indeed, a bit later in the story, when she finally gets back to Bethlehem, she laments that 'the Lord has dealt harshly with me, and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me'. But still she hopes for something more for these her daughters-in-law: according to the measure of their own '*hesed*' to the dead and to her she hopes they will receive from the Lord.

And their *hesed* has indeed been considerable. According to the rabbis, *hesed* towards the dead is the act of preparing the burial shroud – which it seems Ruth and Orpah must have done for their dead husbands, Naomi's sons. As for their *hesed* towards Naomi herself – well, they've remained with her and cared for her when tradition would dictate that their marriage contracts were ended. 'Indeed', according to one commentary, 'by not leaving Naomi [when their husbands died], and continuing to live with her they [were], in effect, acting as if their marriage contracts were still in effect. They [would have been] entitled to claim a contract sum [compensation for their dead husbands] from Naomi, and return home', but at significant cost to themselves they have refused to abandon her.<sup>2</sup> So now, in her turn, Naomi is dealing 'kindly' with them. She is releasing them from their duty to her. She's putting aside her need and desire for their continued company and support, so as to give them a possible future.

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<sup>1</sup> David Atkinson, *The Wings of Refuge: The Message of the book of Ruth* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1983), p.44.

<sup>2</sup> *Crossing Borders: Exploring Brexit through the Lens of Ruth*, A Public Theology Initiative of the Corrymeela Community (Belfast: Corrymeela Community, 2018).

Finally, given all the circumstances, Orpah agrees to go. But, says the text, ‘Ruth clung to her’ – and the word ‘clung’ is another Hebrew word with powerful resonance. It’s the verb for committed, faithful ‘cleaving’; it’s used to characterise the marriage relationship in the book of Genesis, and also the love that God desires from his people. ‘What does the Lord your God require of you?’ asks the book of Deuteronomy. ‘Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him... him alone shall you worship; to him you shall hold fast’ – cleave, cling (Deut. 10: 12, 20).<sup>3</sup> As scholar David Atkinson writes: ‘Ruth, the Moabite, [the worshipper of foreign gods] ... is displaying a quality of life meant to be characteristic of the people of Yahweh’.<sup>4</sup> And she professes this radical commitment to and love for her mother-in-law ‘in language that remains profoundly moving even to today’,<sup>5</sup> and in one of the most memorable speeches in the canon: ‘Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you!’, she says. ‘Where you go, I will go: where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God’ (Ruth 1:16).

Last week, I said that the book of Ruth is a story – a work of fiction rather than history, whose date of composition is unknown. It’s set in the time of the judges but many scholars believe it was written centuries later, after Israel’s return from exile in Babylon. Significantly, this post-exilic time was one in which some elements of Hebrew society sought to reconstruct their culture and traditions by purging foreigners from their midst (sound familiar, anyone!). For example, the policies of Ezra and Nehemiah reject mixed marriage and even instruct Hebrew men to divorce their foreign wives. Some scholars suggest that, in this context, the book of Ruth is written as a kind of counter-narrative to such policies of ethnic cleansing and the identification of ‘racial’ with ‘ritual’ purity. Others are less inclined to view the story as composed with this

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<sup>3</sup> Atkinson, *The Wings of Refuge*, p.49.

<sup>4</sup> Atkinson, *The Wings of Refuge*, p.49.

<sup>5</sup> *Crossing Borders*.

political purpose explicitly in mind,<sup>6</sup> but whatever its context, it's certainly true that the book of Ruth offers a remarkably favourable portrayal of this foreign woman, this daughter of a people traditionally considered Israel's enemy.

And two things are particularly striking, I think. One is that Ruth is never portrayed as simply assimilated – as having left her Moabite heritage behind. The text seems not afraid to make space for difference and it characterizes her from beginning to end as a Moabite, from the country of Moab, sometimes calling her the Moabite from Moab – just to be sure we get the message (Ruth 1:4, 22; 2:2, 6, 10, 21; 4:5, 10)! The second is that Ruth is recognized not just for her goodness, but specifically as displaying the qualities of *hesed* and faithful self-dedication (cleaving) that characterise Israel's God, and that the people of Israel are commanded to display in response. It seems to me there can be no fuller recognition of shared humanity than to see in the stranger, the enemy, the capacity for and expression of your own highest aspirations and values.

And what's really astonishing is that in about the fifth century BCE, the unknown Hebrew author of the book of Ruth could make this imaginative leap – could understand the stranger as like 'us', as like even the best of us, so that we can see ourselves as mutually reciprocating, sharing a future. It's an imaginative leap many still find difficult, and some still systematically refuse. Yesterday we heard news of the death by suicide of an asylum seeker in detention on Nauru – a young man who had sought a future among us, and recognition of humanity shared. After five years of being refused these graces, he succumbed to despair. His name was Fariborz Karami – he was 26 and newly married – he leaves behind on Nauru his younger brother, his distraught mother, and his widow. I imagine she might be about Ruth's age. It's a shame, for their sake, that the quality of *hesed*, loving kindness, so celebrated in Moab and ancient Israel, seems in such short supply in our land.

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<sup>6</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), p.321.