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'Ruth's Tale' Revisited (Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8)

Pentecost VII

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Thank you, Sarah, for inviting me to respond to your 'Ruth's Tale' series. You have delighted us with four episodes of deft story-telling, not to mention the literary nuances and details of the social and cultural context that have increased our appreciation of the Book of Ruth. It's a hard act to follow.

From our conversation, I think the idea is that, in revisiting 'Ruth's Tale' I am to try to create a space where we can deepen our connection with the text. The wonderful thing about stories is that there is always more to be gleaned from a text. And that includes our lives as text. We can lose some of the treasure if we move on too quickly to the next instalment.

Perhaps a summary might help to take us back into the story. In the prologue, we hear how Naomi, her husband Elimelech and their rather inauspiciously named sons, Mahlon and Chilion, have left Bethlehem in Judea to go to the land of Moab to escape famine. There disaster strikes, and Naomi loses not only her husband but both sons. For women at that time this was particularly disastrous, because it represented not only an emotional loss, but a loss of social and economic security. In Naomi's case this was exacerbated by being an outsider in a foreign land, without kin or rights. So, hearing that the famine in Bethlehem has passed, Naomi decides to return home.

Although she attempts to discourage them, her two daughters-in-law insist on accompanying her. Orpah is eventually persuaded to return to her family, but Ruth insists on staying with her in words of such great beauty and noble intent that I can't resist reading them in full:

*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: 16-20)*

Their return to Bethlehem coincides with the time of the barley harvest, and Ruth goes out to glean in the fields. She just ‘happens’ to find herself in the field of Boaz, a rich relative of Naomi, and hence a potential ‘kinsman redeemer’ who could offer them economic security. And it just so happens that Boaz is a thoroughly decent man who is going to behave honourably. One thing leads to another – with not a little help from resourceful strategising on the part of both Ruth and Naomi. Ruth becomes Boaz’s wife and Boaz becomes Naomi’s kinsman-redeemer. Everyone seems set to live happily ever after. All loose ends are tied up.

In the coda to the story (Ruth 4: 13-21), Naomi who has lost two sons is even given a replacement son for her old age. When Obed, Ruth and Boaz’s firstborn arrives, the women say to Naomi:

Blessed be the Lord who has not left you this day without next of kin... He shall be a restorer of life and nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who is more to you than seven sons, has born him’ (Ruth 4: 14-15) ... [Then] the women of the neighbourhood gave him a name saying, ‘A son has been born to Naomi’ (v.17).

This short passage is interesting because it points to the significant part played by women throughout this story – despite a patriarchal context that afforded no economic or social security for women apart from being under male protection. (I have already referred to Ruth and Naomi’s agency in pursuing and achieving the betrothal between Ruth and Boaz.) In the above extract, the women are like some Greek chorus interpreting Naomi’s story for her and for us. They also remind us that the relationship between Ruth and Naomi is arguably the central relationship in the story. This is the real love story in ‘Ruth’s Tale’. This raises an interesting question: Why make Ruth, the outsider, the undoubted hero of the tale?

In providing a genealogy for King David, the coda also reminds us that this family story fits into a much larger story – the story of God’s people. Obed is to be the father of Jesse, who, in turn, is the father of David. This raises another interesting question about the relationship between myth and history for the ‘writer’ of this book – if this story is based on a folk tale as some modern scholars believe?

So, what does this story offer us today beyond enjoyment of a well-told tale and a glimpse into an ancient culture and its social relationships and obligations? Are there themes, that emerge from the story itself and the way it is told, that may still resonate with us several thousand years after the text was written?

Sometimes these themes are readily accessible. For example, the themes of loyalty, steadfastness and love emerge through the character of Ruth and her commitment to Naomi. Other themes emerge more subtly through the narrative structure and language patterns – particularly the use of repetitions and polarities or binary oppositions: e.g. fullness and emptiness. Naomi says to her kinsfolk on her return from Moab:

*Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mar,
for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me.
I went away full
But the Lord has brought me back empty... (Ruth 1: 20b-21a).*

(She seems to forget that she and her family left Bethlehem because of famine, but in terms of family she was 'full' at that time).

Other binaries seem to be variations on this theme and the overarching binary seems to be home and exile. It is in returning home to Bethlehem from exile in Moab that abundance replaces scarcity; celebration replaces grief; fullness replaces emptiness; feast replaces famine; marriage and fruitfulness replace bereavement and barrenness.

The trouble with neat binaries is that they don't allow for the fluidity of our lived experience. Even within the biblical text they are challenged. After all, it is the outsider Ruth who enables Naomi to come home and who is instrumental in the restoration of her fortunes on so many levels. Yet for Ruth it is not a return to a home she has left. In what sense, then, is she coming home? Maybe there are clues in the beautiful oath she makes to Naomi – and perhaps not just to Naomi, but to some deeper calling within her.

As tonight's Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8 reading suggests, there are seasons in our lives: 'There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens'. Sometimes we find ourselves in the place of celebration and harvest: we fall in love; we have children; we at last find a job that fits our sense of vocation; we find a community of apparently like-minded people and so on. At such times, we can feel that we have last found our place, our reason for being here. But there will be lean times, wilderness times, times of bereavement and struggle: relationships may be lost through death or the inability to keep faith – or, if not lost, then strained and challenged; the dream job turns into – if not a nightmare – then something less than it promised; or loss of health or life stage means we need to leave it; communities and organisations develop cracks ... And even if the externals don't change, an inner sense of restlessness can leave us feeling stuck when we want to move on.

Not only are there seasons in our lives, but the weather can change from hour to hour. Christian Wiman (*My Bright Abyss*) speaks of ‘the delights and demolitions of daily life’.

So where is that ‘happy-ever-after’ that we secretly hope for? Perhaps it is less a matter of ‘happy ever after’ than trusting, in the words of Dame Julian of Norwich, that ‘All will be well; all manner of thing will be well’ – or in the words of Dame Edith Sitwell: ‘Nothing is lost. All in the end is harvest’. The ‘all’ is also there in St Paul’s, words, ‘And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, who are called according to his purpose’ (Romans 8:28).

It is often only in hindsight that we can see that this is so, that what we would have preferred not to have had in our lives, has in fact borne fruit. And this is more likely to happen if we have developed practices of reflecting on our lives, gleaning what we can from what comes our way. Sometimes, though, it is better not to try to make sense of things too quickly, but to be fully present – to come home to where we are right now – even if that means coming home to what is messy and unresolved.

I would like to conclude with some lines from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, brought to the attention of the theology group by Peter Yuile:

Above all, trust in the slow work of God.
We are quite naturally impatient in everything
To reach the end without delay.
We should like to skip the intermediate stages.
We are impatient of being on the way to something
Unknown, something new.
And yet it is the law of all progress
That it is made by passing through
Some stages of instability –
And that it may take a very long time. (From *Hearts on Fire*)