

come and will return. So surely is the NT which should occupy our time. Do we feel or think that at times?

The apostle Paul, in the closing months of his life, when writing to Timothy, shared his view of, what we call the OT, what he called the Hebrew Bible.

"¹⁵ and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3).

When he says 'scriptures' he has in mind - what we call the OT. Post Easter, Post Pentecost, after 30 plus years of church planting, across the Mediterranean, he declares about the Hebrew scriptures - the OT - it is God breathed, and still the key means to be thoroughly equipped, useful for teaching rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness. So don't disconnect the OT from the NT. Keep a regular pattern of reading from both testaments.

So how do we approach Ruth (or any OT passage) - our prayer can be -

'Lord, as we hear the scripture and listen to preaching, will you teach me, rebuke me, correct me, train me in righteousness, Lord I seek to be a servant of yours thoroughly equipped for every good work.'

Secondly. Much of the OT is narrative. It is easier to read and characters to reflect upon and how they show us humanity we

can really relate to. When we think about Ruth, Boaz and Naomi, we can see inspiration, we can see parts of ourselves, we can recognise others. However in OT narrative, add another character to your thinking and reflecting - God - we ask, what am I learning about *God* in this story, even if he is not actively present and perhaps even seems absent or silent.

So as we approach Ruth, we are asking, praying -

'Lord teach me about yourself in these four chapters, help me to grow in my understanding and love of you.'

About Ruth? Is there a book in the OT that shows better the extraordinary power of love in action - love shown as kindness and generosity - which goes beyond expected obligations? Is there a better book in the OT, which models how to welcome strangers from another land? It is a book, as we will see in the four weeks, about kindness and audacity. About how kindness propels people to act with boldness, bravery, fearlessness, with courage, with audacity.

There was a famine in the land. Elimelech, Naomi and their sons Mahlon and Kilion leave Bethlehem to travel 80 or so km to Moab. They do not permanently leave Israel, they go there to live temporarily - as shown in the Hebrew word used. They go, to live temporarily elsewhere, due to famine like Jacob and his sons went to Egypt.

They move for necessary economic reasons - I met with a chaplain in the Netherlands recently and he shared how he saw two international groups in his church - some who moved because they were able to due to their education, due to work opportunities in the Netherlands; there were others who were

there because they were forced to leave their countries due to economic problems, warfare, persecution. The story for each international who settles in the Netherlands will vary from each person - for some it is choice, for others necessity.

The move did not work as hoped. They left seeking life. In Moab, Elimelech dies. Her two sons marry. Orphan and Ruth. After 10 years of marriage - these two young women - who would have married probably in their late teens or early 20s - are widows. Tragedy. It begin with a family of four which left, in hope, seeking a new start. And it is now a group of three widows, only Naomi is left of this original family.

Naomi makes the decision. To return to Bethlehem. With her daughters in law. However at the point in the road. She makes three exhortations.

Firstly, she tells them to go back, they have been kind to her and to her sons, they have been good wives, they are released from their commitments. She kisses them goodbye, there is lots of crying, they say they will stay.

She tells them to go again. Even if she married that night even if she had a son that night, would they wait all those years for him? Naomi wants them to enjoy the love and joy of marriage again, a love and joy that has been taken from them, and for them to return home.

More tears. Orpah kisses and leaves. It has been said you learn lots about a person in the bible, about their character, from the first words they say - and Naomi despite her deep losses is caring for those around her.

Ruth refuses to go. Naomi exhorts her one more time - go back.

Then the moment. 'Where you go I will go, 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.'

Ruth's persistence reminds me of Sam in Lord of the Rings. He will not leave Frodo no matter what. Ruth has been discharged from her duties. She has been told she has been a good wife to her husband, she has been a good daughter in law, and that she will wait a long time for a husband if she comes back with Ruth.

Yet. Ruth commits her life to Yahweh. And to Naomi. Ruth will not leave Naomi. Ruth shows love and kindness in action that goes beyond mere obligation, it is generosity, it is brave courageous. She will leave her kin, her family, her siblings, her best friends, her cousins, she will go to a foreign land to which she has never been and has trouble with the language. She goes not for what she will get. She goes so she can give. What she can give to Naomi.

A specific point. It is good to get scripture right down to the ground. Those of you who are a mother in law here. How do you see your daughter in law? In UK there are always jokes about the relationships between the spouse and the parent in law or outlaws as they can be called!

But to mother's in law, what sacrifices have your daughter in law made? Have you told them - for Naomi tells her she has been a good wife. You know it can be very powerful. I remember a moving story. A friend of Jolanda and mine, had cared for her husband through cancer. She wondered a little how her mother in law saw her. Was she good enough for her son. Then in the

months before he died, the mother wrote a letter to her, saying she had been a good wife, cared for her son and thanked her. That was, I believe an important helpful healing letter. For the sacrifices you know your daughter in law has made, have you told her?

And daughters in law here among us. It is worth to reflect on the sacrifices you have made not only for your family but for your in laws. Sacrifice is language that things have been costly to you. Where these sacrifices have become pain or irritants, to invite the Lord to come in and bring healing into those wounds if they exist.

Perhaps husbands, this is an important area to consider as well, where your spouse has made sacrifices for your wider family. This may not just mean living in your country when their family are elsewhere. This can be sacrifices in other means. It can mean a lot, to act like we see in this story, to acknowledge it. Despite what we believe, our wives cannot see always inside your head! So you need to tell your spouse. Thank you for what you have done. How you did it. How you tried. How ...

More general. Ruth models service of others. She models sacrificial giving to others in need. Actually she also models how to welcome a stranger - Naomi is a stranger in Moab - Ruth's aim - to quote some of our bible study notes on 'Community' - was that she wanted Naomi to feel at home, as she grieved as a widow and as a mother. For Naomi to find a home. And as that means Naomi going back to Bethelhem, she will go with her.

And they go. They arrive. Yet for Naomi is a return to a familiar place, which is not very different, the streets and houses remind her of not only the past but also of what she has lost and grieves.

The whole town is stirred. I wonder why? Call me Mara she tells those who speak with her. Four times she accuses the Lord in her conversations. Naomi in her personal lament, appears to talk and act as if Ruth is not there, not introducing her to family or suggesting she has had some restoration in her loss through Ruth, but she is empty. The gift of Ruth's loyalty is forgotten in these times of despair.

The name Naomi means pleasant. She wants to be called Mara - bitter. The Lord Almighty has made her bitter. Exodus 22 had said God was protector of widows. The Lord, in Deut 10, defends the cause of the fatherless and widow, and loves the alien / stranger, giving him or her food and clothing. She does not believe this has happened.

'The Lord brought me back empty, afflicted me, brought misfortune.' Like Job she believes God is active in his world and like Job, she believes her misfortune is because of the Covenant God. Naomi laments. It suggests an honesty and lack of pretence. She stands before God and wants to know, what is the answer. See the mixture of the names. Yahweh and Almighty. Almighty - all powerful - yes powerful but if she only said this, you could say, this is about God who is distant and uninvolved. But she says *Yahweh*. Yahweh is Lord of the Covenant. He is committed to his people - committed and he will not break his commitments. He is powerful to make a difference. His covenant name says he is committed and close. But in her eyes, she does not see proof of that since she first left Bethlehem.

Where can we go from this? I think it is - she *laments*, she declares God's inaction or how God has not been acting in her best interests. She speaks it out. We don't know if she only said this to her neighbours. But Psalm 88 we read, perhaps one of the

darkest psalms in the psalter. Why is it there.? To show in such times we can speak such words to God. It models also an ongoing desire to keep connected to God. It is praying in the darkness. A theologian Walter Bruggemann once said - "Yahweh must be addressed even if Yahweh never answers."

Secondly the promises are there in scripture, and they can be mysterious, and we don't know why his ways are what they are, but as we are reminded in Romans 8, we know ultimately God works in all things for good towards those who love him and that nothing - nothing man throws at us, nothing natural, no suffering connected to our faith, can separate us from God's love... no matter how it feels. The example for some of us to return to, is shown in our bread and wine, the death of Christ on a cross - atonement for our sins, victory over death, but also declaring his love and commitment to us, that he is for us and not against us...

To finish on names. Naomi - pleasant - asks people to call her Mara - bitter. In the Bible, names matter and often reveal the character of people. On a mountain, God declared his name to Moses:

⁵ Then the Lord came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the Lord. ⁶ And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, 'The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, ... we will see how Yahweh does not change his name - his character - we will see how he expresses his character in the events in the coming months of Naomi's life.

For us, our God does not change in suffering, and that can be what we hold to, when we are in those places of darkness. The Psalmist does not know why things are as they are, but he keeps

and needs to keep praying each morning. Paul writes to believers who face persecution and many other troubles, to remind them that in all this bad things, God is working for their good. And in all these things, God still loves as much as when things were going well. Those are what we stand upon.

Ruth 1. Migration, Commitment from daughters in law, conversion to God and sacrificial service, struggling with suffering and where and what is God doing.

"So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter in law, arriving in Bethlehem, as the barley harvest was beginning." (1:22).

Prayer:

Lord God your ways are mysterious and your purposes beyond our understanding. Yet we know that you love us and that in your good time you will bring a harvest. Help us to trust you through the dark moments and wait in hope and faith for the dawn. Amen.