

where people could sit, discuss, make decisions at the entrance to the town.

The Meeting.

And in this square - the town gate - the action takes place. We remembered how it had ended. Ruth leaves just before dawn breaks. We heard her and Naomi talk. Now, as they were talking perhaps, Boaz was off to this town gate.

He sits there and we see, possibly, another "as it turned out" moment. The Hebrew says - 'the kinsman redeemer was passing by'. Just as Boaz sat down, there he was! We've seen how Ruth a stranger in town, 'as it turned out' (2:3), walked to the one field, where she could get help. And while she was still there, Boaz happened to visit his work place at that time on that day. God was at work. Such moments, invite us to pray as leader Nehemiah models with his sudden arrow prayers, of praise and petition - in such "as it turned out moments" to pray "Lord whatever you are doing here, help me to be part of your work and plans..." To consider the meetings, the events that are coming up in the next days, to consider the Lord's hand can be at work.

To add. Considering this is Bethlehem, don't forget another "as it turned out moment" - Mary and Joseph are expecting Jesus, yet they are in Nazareth, 130 km north. How would they end up in Bethlehem, they have no plans to go there, yet the prophet Micah declares the Messiah to be born there. "As it turned out" Caesar Augustus declared a census and Joseph, has to go to his family town - Bethlehem, and Jesus "great David Greater's Son is born."

The Negotiation.

Now, centuries before, we are the same gate that Joseph would have known or gone through. Here Boaz's standing and authority are shown. He speaks to the anonymous kinsman redeemer - the Hebrew is *ploni 'almoni* - which some scholars translate as 'Mr So and So' - the man is anonymous. Boaz speaks to him, and Mr So and So comes over and sits. Boaz goes and gets 10 elders and get them to sit down with them.

And the offer is made. Land is to be sold. This is the first time we hear of land and Naomi. This conversation points us to Leviticus 25

"If one of your fellow Israelities becomes poor and sells some of their property, their nearest relative is to come and redeem what they have sold." (25:25).

Family had a right if they had sold the land, that they could redeem it - buy it back, when they had the money. Or it returned to them at the Year of Jubilee. However, in this case, the land, is *not* to go to Naomi, because Mr So and Son can get it. This suggests, in scholars eyes, that what Naomi is selling is her *right* to redeem the land of Elimelech her husband, and so the unnamed man would buy the right which allows him to buy the land back from the person who now has it, and so he would use this extra land until the Year of Jubilee.

The man with no name, agrees to do it. He will redeem.

Now it seems Mr So and So going to deprive Boaz and Ruth of each other, there will be no happy ending...

Yet then. Boaz continues. He says, to buy the land, is also to mean he will marry Ruth. Ruth the widow Boaz says, Ruth the Moabite. Hearing those words, we are again reminded of the tragedy in her life and that she is a foreigner in Israel and that she is a vulnerable lady.

Now, the man says he won't do it, he will endanger his own estate / land holdings. The logic. Think of the Parable of the Prodigal Sons. Two sons, land is divided among them. But it remains the family land passed down. If the anonymous man has a son with Ruth, then *that* son gets land, so less for any other children he has. And that land goes to Naomi's family - not to his. What Boaz says is based on Deuteronomy 25 (v5-10) - that when a woman's husband dies, the brother of the husband (if he is not married, and if there are no children from the marriage) is to marry her and if they have children, that *first* son, would carry on the name of the dead husband, so his name would not be lost from the records of Israel. It was expected that the brother in law would do this - if not, then he would be shamed in the front of the elders of the town. This is the *levirate law*.

What is happening here is similar but it is not the same is it? The law limits this *only* to brothers-in-law. There is no legal force upon this kinsman-redeemer. Yet Boaz raises it. It appears to be, at least in Bethlehem, there was a family responsibility ... moral responsibility ... not legal, it is voluntary. It is *like* what Deut 25 talks about, seeking to help those widows in need who have no children. We see that the unknown redeemer can stand down without shame, for, we suspect, he is far enough away as a relative that the responsibility is not expected upon him.

Why had this community responsibility developed beyond the law? We do not know. But. The question I find striking - is this about generosity? It is not about how *close* to the law the

community can live, rather how they can live *beyond* it. Rather than keeping to the law and not doing less or more, the law becomes a base to take off from. The nearest comparison can be the parable of the good samaritan. The lawyer wants to know who is my neighbour - to apply the law, who is in, who is out. The Samaritan - everyone is the neighbour and he will do what needs to be done. Generosity.

To add. Boaz we said had gone beyond the law. His only expectation as land owner was to allow Ruth to glean those 7 weeks. Yet he provides food for her, gives her protection by encouraging her to work with his servants and commands his workers not to hassle her, and he even invites her to eat with the workers. So do we see grace, generosity, going beyond the law; Boaz does it, and it seems in Bethlehem the law of Moses was for the brother in law, the community's feeling and its values were to go far beyond that, and apply the principles.

Boaz describes the situation - to marry Ruth, means to provide descendants for Mahlon, to keep the family land within the family, and to provide for the protection and security of Ruth. He has completed what Ruth asked of him the night before, (see Ruth 3).

The Blessing

So, as the man stands with no sandal. Boaz has declared his intentions, declaring the 10 elders, and the crowd who have gathered, are witnesses. We then hear:

"¹¹ Then the elders and all the people at the gate said, "We are witnesses. May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the family of Israel. May you have standing in Ephrathah and be

famous in Bethlehem. ¹² Through the offspring the Lord gives you by this young woman, may your family be like that of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah."

Now, this would be a suitable place to end this book. Someone said it is like Jane Austin novels, everything works out well at the end! Lots of cheering and celebration after the blessing.

"Boaz's declaration heralds a happy ending, where everyone walks away content, satisfied that the right thing has been done and in the right way" (JPS Bible Commentary, *Ruth*).

However Deuteronomy again influences this Book. Moses declared years before:

"No Ammonite or Moabite or any of their descendants may enter the assembly of the LORD not even in the tenth generation." (Deuteronomy 23:4)

In the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, foreign - non Jewish wives - are sent away. I believe here, the exception, is possible to do with Ruth's faith in Yahweh and so her statement of faith in chapter 1 is key. "Your God will be my God, your people will my people". And how her faith was not private but known - as Boaz said in chapter 2 - "May the Lord repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge." And, again in the nighttime talk, "all the people of my town know that you are a woman of noble character." (3:11).

The blessing shows that the people warmly welcome her into the community. Reading it closely, across the 4 chapters, you see how Ruth is regularly described publically as Ruth the Moabite -

and yet after the blessing, she is described "Boaz took Ruth and and she became his wife." (4:13). Acceptance.

'Ruth had set out from Moab, she committed herself to Naomi's people, yet to be part of a community doesn't depend on one side - the community has to be willing to accept that person.'

A person can desire to join the community, but the community has to be willing to accept that person.

The blessings offered by the people of Bethlehem, signal her acceptance and enact her integration into the community. Wonderful! An Indian female theologian wrote about Ruth, reminding us that Ruth was a widowed alien migrant worker. In South Asia, there are many who are from other faiths, like Ruth was, and who have come to know Jesus as Lord and Saviour and are disowned by their original community. The Church this theologian says, needs to learn from the example of Boaz and the people of Bethlehem, how ethnicity, race, nationality, tribe or gender, should not lead us to ignore our responsibility to other believers.

There is more within this blessing. "May she be like Rachel and Leah." They were mothers of the 12 tribes (with their servants). Ruth is honoured - she is aligned with these ancient matriarchs, allowed to stand in their company. We use this in football. Freddie de Jong - now of Barcelona - can he stand in the company of Crujff, van Basten ? To say a player stands in their company says how great we view them. The people of Bethlehem bless her to be like the great matriarchs. It shows acceptance.

Also. Rachel and Leah in Genesis, appear to have worshiped other gods, and they too turned from them as Ruth did.

"May your family be like that of Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah." Tamar and Judah's story is a difficult one and questionable. Judah makes Tamar pregnant thinking she is a prostitute when she is his widowed daughter in law, (see Genesis 38). Yet at the end he declares she did right and he was wrong. Tamar was a Canaanite woman as well. A non Hebrew mother shaping the line of Judah.

Also, the child who is mentioned. An ancestor of Boaz. But also, Perez - the child - was named meaning "a breach or a break" = he was called that because he pushed his way out of the womb ahead of his twin brothers. Maybe our twins here we should ask how that was when they were born! Breach - to break a wall. Mentioning him, Perez points to how Ruth has breached the wall that excluded Moabites, through her faith in Yahweh... maybe it reminded how she breached the wall of the minds of the town, could a Moabite become a believer in Yahweh?

The Healing.

The last verses. The story comes to a happy end. Naomi's emptiness had been replaced. She has received healing. The final step in that healing - the birth of Obed, Ruth and Boaz's first son. As I have said before, I am struck how the Book is called Ruth. Yet I believe the ending verses, where Naomi is the focus, suggests we have seen a journey of healing for her. From deep tragedy, where she felt God was against her, when she is silent and inactive, yet her confidence begins to be restored as she sees God's provision for them. Later, she takes initiative and bitterness is apparently being replaced by hope.

Moses had said:

"¹⁷ For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God ... ¹⁸ He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. ¹⁹ And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt. ²⁰ Fear the Lord your God and serve him." (Deuteronomy 10).

Naomi questioned this promise and God's character. Now her faith as well as emotions and social relationships are being healed. And we see how that healing came to her. God was not limited by her lack of resources or how she felt there was no hope, he had solutions even if she could not see any. Her view on how things were did not turn him away from her - he was always for her even if she was not friendly to him.

We see how he acted in providence. But also, we see the people he used to bring healing. Ruth, Boaz, a foreman, servant girls, the elders and people of Bethlehem. He acted. And his people acted. Church is to be a hospital you know that. A messy place. Where people can receive healing and discover the Lord and draw near to him and be restored however long that takes. We long All Saints to be a church of healing. Through our actions, love, generosity, time, and in the midst of it God at work by his Spirit...

Obed is the name of the child. It is a shortened form of Obadiah. Which means servant of Yahweh. The child is called a *go el* - a redeemer. Yet he has just been born! What can he do? Boaz was called a redeemer. Calling a baby a redeemer is an important point. "*Whoever* the human *go el* is at any given time, it is the Lord himself who is the true redeemer and the provider of all that is needed." (Fyall, *Ruth* p.39).

The King

Then to finish. The story seems to have ended. And then there is more. Yet this writing is often what puts people off the OT - a whole list of names. We see 10 years at the start of the Book, linked to death. 10 generations described at the end, pointing to descendants and to life for the nation. The book honours whose efforts and faithfulness led to the birth of Israel's greatest king - the lovingkindness (hesed) shown by Ruth and by Boaz that made such a birth possible. Ruth's hesed and her hutzpah benefited the whole nation - it led to the birth of Israel's most illustrious king and ushered in a new epoch in Israel's history. The blessing to Boaz - 'may you have standing and be famous in Bethlehem' - the blessing was fulfilled - Boaz was the greatgrandfather of David.

We see the preservation of David's line. So the narrative is beyond, showing God's providence and care in the life of one family. It concerns the life of the entire nation and of the entire world.

For God will bring his rule through David. And from David, "great David's greater son"

Tamar, Rahab (who is Boaz's mother), Ruth are significant figures not just for the line of David but also for Jesus... Matthew, in his gospel, begins it with a list of names, and he chooses to include a number of women in that list of ancestors of Jesus.

1 This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah

the son of David, the son of Abraham.... :

³ Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar,

Perez the father of Hezron,

Hezron the father of Ram,

⁴ Ram the father of Amminadab,

Amminadab the father of Nahshon,

Nahshon the father of Salmon,

⁵ Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab,

Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth,

Obed the father of Jesse,

⁶ and Jesse the father of King David.

Consider how many people heard about Ruth, through connection to Jesus. In his opening verses of his Gospel, Matthew chooses to include her name. Ruth the great-grandmother of David, through whom would come the Messiah, Jesus, Son of Abraham, Son of David.

These name of women reminds us of God's generosity spilling out beyond national boundaries, embracing the whole world, his Generosity and redemption coming through the One through whom blessing and healing comes to the nations.

Shall we pray:

Lord God of eternity and of today, of the whole of history and this moment, we thank you that you are working out your purposes. Make us conscious of the significance of every decision so that we do not miss our part in your great story.

Give us faith and vision to see our part and to do our tasks faithfully, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.