

23rd July 2017

Holy Communion 8am and Parish Eucharist 9.30am

@St Saviour's

“Restraint and redemption”

Ruth 3, Matthew 6:25-34

Aim: *To explore ways in which the characters in Ruth 3 (Naomi, Ruth and Boaz) inspire us towards Restraint and teach us about redemption.*

Introduction- a Fast paced society

What do you think it might feel like to be completely dependent on another person, or on other people for everything that you need to survive? Maybe you know, maybe this is something you have experienced. Actually we have all experienced complete dependence on someone else at the point of being born. A baby has only one way to ensure his or her needs- to be fed or changed, or simply paid attention to, are met, and that is to cry – as loudly as possible with no patience and no restraint and to carry on crying until their need is met. Patience and restraint with regard to meeting our needs, or perceived needs, are learnt later, and could be considered to be signs of maturity. Or maybe it's more accurate to say that **sometimes** patience and restraint are learned later...We live in a culture which, it seems to me, does not have much patience- everything has to be instantaneous, as fast as possible- whether that is communication, gratification, travel, whatever you can think of...and this can be a good thing if you are in a hurry- but, then, why are we in such a hurry?

Message: the Restraint of Ruth and Boaz and the theme of Redemption

The world in which Ruth, who is the subject of our present sermon series, lived seems to have moved at a

much slower pace. In this week's reading which is chapter 3 of the book of Ruth we find examples of restraint and maturity in all 3 of the main characters of the book as the story continues.

We began our exploration of the book of Ruth 2 weeks ago when we encountered the widowed Israelite Naomi and her widowed daughter –in-law Ruth leaving the famine struck country of Moab to journey – probably slowly and painfully -to Bethlehem, Naomi's home town in search of food. The unlikely pair arrives at Bethlehem as the barley harvest commences and Ruth finds work gleaning in the fields of their rich relation Boaz, Ruth's loving kindness overflows and touches Naomi and Boaz bringing out the best in their behaviour and for a time Ruth and Naomi are saved from starvation. Chapter 2 closes with the statement that Ruth gleaned until the end of the Barley and Wheat harvests and she lived with her Mother in law.

So –as chapter 3 commences it's autumn time and the harvests are over- the ancient food bank for the poor is now closed until next spring. As childless widows Ruth and Naomi are the poorest of the poor, the neediest of the needy, completely dependent on the kindness of others to survive- what will they do?

It may be because the harvests were over and therefore the opportunity to glean was now gone that it's at this point in the story that Naomi recognises the need to seek some security for her daughter in law. Add to this the fact that Naomi knows that she won't be around forever- it's time to plan for Ruth's future. So Naomi comes up with a plan. As an Israelite Naomi would have been aware that

their law made provision for the poor, with the expectation that such provision would come through a near relation. Leviticus 25 states, “ if anyone of your kin falls into difficulty and sells a piece of property then the next of kin shall come and redeem what has been sold...and if any of your kin fall into difficulty ...you shall support them” Ruth and Naomi were certainly in difficulty ... and they were related to Boaz. So shouldn't Boaz support them? Well- yes, and he was already doing so by allowing them to glean in his fields but something more permanent was required to restore their dignity, to redeem them from this situation in which they found themselves.

So Naomi instructs Ruth to have a bath- probably quite a rare thing reserved for special occasions in their culture, to anoint, that is to perfume herself – again an activity reserved for special occasions, to put her best frock on and get herself down to the threshing floor where she was to wait for the right moment then present herself to Boaz. The significance of the special preparation is twofold- it's a sign of the end of her mourning for her dead husband and a sign of her readiness for a new marriage...

I wonder what went through Ruth's mind as Naomi gave her these instructions. I wonder how she felt about being sent to the threshing floor. Threshing floors were usually located in an elevated place outside the town, a place where there was either an expanse of beaten earth or a flat stone pavement on which the gathered crops could be trampled by animals to break the crop up, and then winnowed- that is tossed into the air so that the chaff would fly away on the breeze and the heavier valuable

food grain would fall back to the ground. The workers would eat and drink together- just as they did during the day as they harvested the crops, maybe sometimes the drink would flow freely, and behaviour might become unrestrained. So Naomi is asking a single woman -Ruth to set out in the evening to head for a place where she would be vulnerable and alone, where she might be rejected, or worse where she might be molested...

Jewish tradition suggests that Ruth was about 40 years old- still young enough to bear a child, and still strikingly beautiful at this time

And the same tradition tells us that Boaz was 80, that he had been married before and had 60 children- all of whom had died...

We may question the accuracy of the actual ages of Ruth and Boaz and the actual number of Boaz's children but it's not unreasonable to be confident in the fact that Boaz was a lot older than Ruth, that he had no children,

If you have been Ruth- would you have gone to the threshing floor?

Naomi's instructions to Ruth conclude with the assurance that “he will tell you what to do”. Who will tell her what to do?- we usually assume that Naomi meant that Boaz would tell her to do- but in fact as we shall see- he doesn't, so maybe Ruth understood Naomi to mean that GOD would tell her what to do, and because of her love of Naomi, and because she trusted God she went. At the threshing floor Ruth shows considerable restraint- she waits for hour after hour after hour. Six hours pass

and eventually Boaz, full and contented lies down at the end of a heap of grain, Ruth follows Naomi's instructions -to a point, uncovers his feet exposing them to the cold night air and lies down herself in close proximity. She is now completely vulnerable, – He wakes up, rolls over and there she is!

It's dark- who is she, he asks?

"I am Ruth- your servant", she replies and then takes the initiative- "Spread your cloak over your servant for you are next of Kin" In these words she identifies Boaz as the kinsman redeemer- and in her action puts herself completely at his mercy.

What a scene- because we know what happens next we can too quickly race on at this point and miss the point of the scene and indeed of the whole book. It's all about redemption! Where else have we encountered the same imagery- the image of someone vulnerable and in need being kept safe beneath mighty wings?

In the very same story Ruth 2 v 12 Naomi says to Ruth, "may the Lord reward you for your deeds, .under whose wings you have come for refuge"

In Deuteronomy 32 the image of an eagle whose wings are spread in protection over young is offered as a picture of God's care for his people

And Psalm 91 v 4 says "under his wings you will find refuge"

This imagery is found elsewhere in scripture as well, and in the gospel of Matthew we these words of Jesus,

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem..... How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings ...?
(Matthew 23:37)

So Ruth at this point is a symbol of every vulnerable person who needs protection by God and redemption And Boaz is a symbol of every person who meets the needs of another in the name of God and goes some way towards restoring that person's dignity.

But back to the story – what will Boaz do?

To emphasise the qualities Ruth has shown throughout the story Boaz acknowledges her exceptional loyalty to her dead husband's family and her inestimable lovingkindness towards her Mother in Law by his exclamation that this last instance of her loyalty is greater than the first , he is acknowledging that for a woman in the prime of life to give up the opportunity to marry a younger man just to perpetuate the memory of her late husband is a great sacrifice, greater than her earlier kindness to Naomi by staying with her.

And then to emphasise the restraint and propriety Boaz shows throughout the story the storyteller brings in another character which is the nearer relative to whom Ruth and Naomi might have turned to act at their kinsman redeemer. This addition to the story also emphasises the fact that Boaz has choice in how to act-

he does not **have** to redeem Ruth; he does so freely by choice, because he is good.

So good in fact that not only does he show personal restraint in this situation but also great concern for Ruth's safety and reputation by insisting that she stay only until it is just about to get light, but before people could recognise one another before departing to return to Naomi. And so good that he shows yet again his abundant generosity by heaping onto Ruth 6 measures- probably over 50lb in weight of grain- to Naomi.

Naomi's greeting to Ruth seems a strange one to us- "who are you?" Are you still a widow or are you now a married woman again? Ruth shares her account of the events that have taken place and now we must wait for chapter 4 to describe how events will unfold,

But what shall we take away from our consideration of chapter 3?

We need to return to the threshing floor- to Ruth's restraint in waiting for the right moment to approach Boaz and to that decision by Ruth to make herself vulnerable to her potential redeemer and to trust God to tell her what to do next,

Challenge: Are we willing to make ourselves vulnerable and to trust God for our redemption?

This moment in the story of Ruth is deeply challenging. I began by asking the question, what it would feel like to be completely dependent on another person,

The fact of the matter is that we **are** completely dependent on God- our creator who gives us life, by whose will alone we are brought into being, and who alone can redeem our lives and grant us the gift of eternal life

But in our fast paced world we can be distracted from remembering that this is true, and as we race through each God given day we forget to acknowledge our dependence on God and give thanks to him

I quoted earlier from Matthew's gospel words of Jesus, but I missed a bit out, the full quote is this

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing?

Ruth knew that she could not redeem herself- Ruth was willing to present herself to Boaz, Ruth was willing to trust Boaz and to put herself under his protection

To what extent have you and I acknowledged that we cannot redeem ourselves? In the light of our reflection on Ruth chapter 3 Are we ready to acknowledge our complete dependence on God? are we truly willing to trust Him, to be his children, to offer back to him all that we are and all that we have to be used in his purposes, and will we allow him to shelter us under his wings as he longs to do? Amen