

Homily for People and Parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday 3rd November 2024, Pentecost 24

Readings: **Ruth 1:1-18**

Hebrews 9:11-15

Psalm 146

Mark 12:13-17; 28 - 34

If you have never read the little book of Ruth, in the Old Testament, I highly recommend you read it this week. Even if you have read it many times, I think it's worth re-reading! Almost hidden between the book of Judges and the first book of Samuel, the book of Ruth has only four chapters, but the story is compelling. Within it there is the human experiences of migration, grief and loss; demonstrated qualities of courage, love, and faithfulness; and, in God's grace... a new beginning.

The two central characters in the story are women, and we are told their names. This may not sound unusual, but there are few Biblical stories in which women are the main characters, and when women are mentioned they are not named as often as men.

We are told that a Jewish family was forced to leave their country because of a famine. They left the land of Judah and went to Moab.

Even though this story is set more than three thousand years I think it is already a story we can relate to, because many people in our time are forced to leave their countries of origin because of famine. If you, or I, were starving, or the life of our family was at risk because of famine, persecution, or war... we would leave. And we would leave, hoping that the country we went to would make space for us, and our family, so that we could survive and live peacefully.

We are told that a man called Elimelech, took his wife Naomi, and their two boys to Moab. Subsequently, Elimelech died, leaving Naomi to raise her boys in a land far from her birth. The boys grew and each married local women, but after another ten years both of Naomi's sons died and neither had had children.

Naomi decided to return to Judah because the famine was over... and she perceived that there was little to keep her in Moab. Each of her daughters-in-law offered to go to Judah with her but she encouraged them to stay. Naomi knew only too well the challenge of living in a country where you have to learn the language and customs of a foreign land in order to survive. She encouraged them to stay, go back to their families, and get remarried.

The three women obviously loved one another because we are told that there were tears as this advice was given and considered. One of her daughters-in-law kissed Naomi and went back to her family as suggested, but the other one – the one called Ruth -refused to leave. With great courage and love Ruth said, *"Do not press me to leave you, or 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, shall be my God. Where you die, I will die – and there I will be buried...”

When we're familiar with the whole story, the courage of Ruth's decision may not seem that great for things worked out for Ruth and Naomi in the best possible way. Ruth married Boaz, Naomi had surrogate grandchildren, and in the story of the people of Israel Ruth is remembered as the great-grandmother of Israel's greatest king. Not surprisingly this is a story deeply loved by people who convert to Judaism, as Ruth did. However, Ruth knew nothing of what the future would bring when she made her decision.

Implicit in what Ruth said is that even though people will judge me as a foreigner, because of my accent in the land you call home; even though people will judge me because I am a widow, and after ten years of marriage was unable to give you grandchildren; even though people will judge me because I was not born a Jew, and will spend the rest of my life learning what this means: *“Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God, shall be my God. Where you die, I will die – and there I will be buried...”*

There are at least three elements in the story I hope we can reflect upon this week, and they are faithfulness, hospitality, and grace. In the story Ruth was faithful to her mother-in-law. She did not abandon Naomi to the difficult life of being an elderly widow without land or property. She decided to go with her, and care for her no matter what the cost.

When we think about Ruth's faithfulness and generosity towards her mother-in-law – we might helpfully consider how faithful and generous we are in our own relationships with family, extended family, and close friends. What more could we do? What priority do these relationships have in the busyness of our living? In addition, we might also consider how faithful and generous we are in our relationship with God. What more could we do? What priority does this relationship have in the busyness of our living?

In the story Naomi offered Ruth the intimate hospitality of family. Even though her sons had died... Ruth, as a daughter-in-law continued to be part of Naomi's family. Perhaps she was the longed-for daughter that Naomi never had? Later Boaz offered both Ruth and Naomi hospitality... and their lives, and his life, were immeasurably enriched by this.

Remembering this, we might helpfully consider how willing we are to share our lives with those who come to us from other countries. How willing we are to welcome them into our friendship groups, our congregation, and our family? As we look at the women we shop beside who have come from places far away; the women who come to collect their children beside us at school; the women we work beside... and possibly worship with at church... can we recognise something of Ruth in them?

I wonder when Naomi recognised the grace of God in her journey. Was it the first night on the road, after Ruth had affirmed she was not going to abandon her? Or, was it much later after Boaz had agreed to marry Ruth? Perhaps it was when she held her grandchildren in her arms after years of longing for such a thing? We don't know – but, looking in from outside we can see it, and give thanks.

We might then helpfully ask ourselves how clearly we recognise the grace of God at work in the journey of our own lives, and have a renewed sense of thankfulness? Not just for the big things of the past – but, also the everyday things of the present!

May it be so – in your life and mine.
(Amen)

Would you please join me as I close in prayer:

Holy God, we give thanks for the gift of our lives, and your love. Through your Spirit, please give us the grace, insight, and courage to be more faithful and generous this week. We ask in the name of Christ, who shows us the way. Amen.