

Your people will be my people and your God my God – Ruth 1

Remember the wonderful Ealing comedy *Passport to Pimlico*? You may have seen the report about an Oxfordshire village that has voted likewise... to hold a symbolic referendum on leaving the UK...not to escape postwar rationing and so on, but in protest about plans for housing asylum seekers at a nearby Ministry of Defence site. This is the polite version of last year's asylum hotel protests... and I thought of this as I read the story of Ruth last week.

We're reading this as part of our series on encounters with God in the Old Testament... and it's a story of desperation and migration.... And love and loyalty...

The story starts with a flight from famine... it's not unlike the story of Joseph and his brothers... that takes God's people to Egypt... and we know where that ends... Here, another family settles in a foreign country... in Moab...a country that was *not* best friends with the nation of Israel... but needs must in times of crisis. The family hunkers down for the long term... Naomi and Elimelech's sons marry local girls... life goes on... until it doesn't... Both husband and sons die and all remains of this refugee family is Naomi and her daughters-in-law... they are a picture of loss.

So, Naomi says to herself, there's nothing left for me here and she decides to go back to Judah...

Amidst their tearful protests, Naomi bids farewell to her two daughters in law... and here -after Orpah leaves - we have the heart of our story: Ruth's refusal to let Naomi go home alone and those extraordinary words she speaks to her mother-in-law:

'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.

What does Ruth's declaration tell us about our topic – encounters with God... that idea, that statement that God is in this place? There are I think 3 key things:

First: God is near to everyone... God's presence.... God's love is for *everyone*... The story of the Old Testament is the story of God and God's ancient people Israel, but it's much more than that... and Ruth's story is important here. The default setting for early readers of this text would be that a Jewish man marrying out, as Naomi's sons had done, would be making a big mistake... risking coming under the bad influence of foreign cultures. Yet in Ruth and Naomi's relationship we see someone from *outside* behaving with deep compassion. It's a bit like Jesus' story about the good Samaritan...where there is the hint that *Good Samaritan* is a contradiction in terms. Similarly, you could say Ruth is the good Moabitess who demonstrates love and commitment at a time of crisis. Although God has made a special connection, a covenant, with one nation, this story tells us that God's love, the gift of God's

presence, is without partiality. It's shown in the central irony that person who reflects God's love most luminously, is not even one of God's ancient people – she's a stranger.... It's a timely reminder for us in an age of dispute about how we relate to migrants, that the other – the person who is not like us – deserves our respect and care. They are our neighbour.

Second: God is with us wherever we go... *where you go, I will go*... Ruth says to Naomi... Why would she say and do that? It's possible that sticking with Naomi would have been to Ruth's advantage... perhaps it's better than heading back to her original family in humiliation? Being a widow in such male dominated cultures as hers is to be someone without support, without agency. But would things *really* be any better in Naomi's homeland? There, they'd be two widows, one of whom is a foreigner. That doesn't sound too hopeful. At the beginning of the story Naomi has chosen out of desperation, out of hunger, to leave Judah. Now the tables are turned... but if you wanted to describe Ruth's reasons, you might say that Ruth does this out of faithfulness to her mother-in-law. Her speech is a declaration of loyalty... and I think in this story we can read in Ruth's loyalty to Naomi an echo of God's loyalty to us... That commitment to humans and all creation that is often named in the Old Testament as *steadfast love*... or, to borrow a phrase from the wonderful Jesus Storybook Bible, God loves us with a *Never-Stopping, Never Giving Up, Unbreaking, Always and Forever Love*.

Third – and we've come across this before - God is in relationship...that's both true of the nature of God – who is three persons in one – and also the nature of humans - made in God's image, we are made for relationship and God is known to us in the best of that. When Ruth talks about accompanying Naomi, she doesn't just have in mind a destination – be it Bethlehem or Moab - but a person... I am not turning away from you, Naomi, is what she's saying. This is my primary relationship now.

Her later declaration, as she sets that human connection alongside connection with God, perhaps goes a little further and has a hint of covenant in it: *your people shall be my people and your God my God*.... God is named as present in the relationship between Ruth and Naomi... showing that God is at work, transforming all the relationships that result from Naomi's journey back to Israel...

What a story for our times: one that begins with scarcity and loss and ends with loyalty and inclusion. Because of course the story finishes not just with Ruth and Naomi finding their place in their new/old home... but also with a wedding and the birth of a son... a fairytale ending for one of the loveliest stories in the Bible.

As we reflected on Ruth's story and her steadfast love, and God's steadfast love, we listened to her words set to music by David Childs... the song of Ruth...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3N6yUPll3eA>