

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 8th November 2015 – Remembrance Sunday

Rev Val Reid

Ruth 3: 1-5, 4: 13-17

Mark 12: 38-44

A young woman faces a dilemma.

Should she stay where she is and risk death?

People are dying all around her.

Her husband has died.

There is no food.

No security.

No welfare net.

Or should she risk a difficult journey to another country?

She has been told that there is food there.

Benefits.

The possibility of a new life.

Whether she stays or whether she goes, she is vulnerable.

There are no certainties.

No guarantees.

She decides to leave.

Leave home and familiarity.

Face the hazards of a long and arduous trek.

Trust her future to a tenuous hope.

She arrives in her new country.

She is not welcome.

She lives with a permanent label of foreigner, immigrant, benefit scrounger.

People avoid her in the street.

Gossip about her behind her back.

She manages to scrape a living for herself and an elderly dependent as an agricultural worker.

She is constantly at risk from sexual harassment from the other labourers.

The harvest will soon be over, and then what will she do?

She takes another risk.

She is young, attractive, sexually available.

One night, when he has had rather too much to eat and drink, she seduces the farm owner.

Perhaps she can survive this way.

The book of Ruth is a fable for our times.

Even though it was written 2 ½ or 3 thousand years ago.

In Jewish tradition it is read as part of the two-day celebration of Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks, also known as Pentecost.

The Feast of Weeks celebrates the end of the harvest, and the giving of the Torah: the beginning of the covenant between Yahweh and the people of Israel.

So the book of Ruth is both seasonal and symbolic.

The story is set at the time of harvest.

And it ends with a marriage covenant.

A new child.

A new hope.

Ruth is a book about redemption.

In only 85 verses, the Hebrew word *ga'al* – redeem – is used some 23 times.

But what redemption is, and how it manifests itself, is far from straightforward.

I said just now that it was written 2 ½ or 3 thousand years ago.

It is set during the time of the Judges.

But no-one knows whether it was written during the time of David, the iconic King of Israel.

Or whether it was written in the years after the return from exile, looking back to David's reign, and reflecting on what it means to be a chosen people now, after all that has happened, after generations in Babylon.

The dating is hotly disputed – Biblical scholars do like a hot dating dispute!

The message of the book – if you read it carefully – is clear.

But not necessarily what we like to think.

On the wall of the sisters' room at King's Cross Methodist church is a picture of Ruth and Naomi setting off to Judah.

In the background, Orpah is heading back home.

In the foreground, Ruth and Naomi cling to one another.

They are both elegant, well-dressed, well fed, suspiciously white.

They are an icon of womanly solidarity.

A good symbol for the work of Sister Kay and her companions among the prostitutes of King's Cross.

But I wonder how many of the women who sit in this room for a drink, a chat, a bit of respite, look like their elegant Biblical counterparts.

The Ruth and Naomi of this picture, both refugees, don't look anything like the inhabitants of the Jungle, just outside Calais.

Or the angry and desperate crowds protesting from the army base on Cyprus.

Or the queues of homeless people huddling outside the West London Day Centre at 9 o'clock each weekday morning.

It's hard for us to read this book without the lens of remembered Sunday school stories.

But the characters are not as cute as we were once told.

Ruth, the writer makes clear, is a Moabite.

We probably all know at least one thing about Moab.

Thanks to Stephen Fry's autobiography, we know that 'Moab is my washpot.'

Why?

The Moabites were the enemy.

On the way to Canaan, the promised land, the Israelites were blocked by the Moabites, who wouldn't let them through.

In the book of Numbers (25) the women of Moab seduce the men of Israel, who end up worshipping foreign Gods.

Mixed marriages always end up that way.

In the book of Deuteronomy (23.3) the Lord decrees that no Moabite shall enter into the assembly of the Lord to the 10th generation.

Why were they so hated?

Probably because they stood in the way of the Israelites' journey to the land they believed was theirs.

But of course we always make up stories about why our enemies are so hateful.

Why they deserve to be reviled.

So in Genesis (19) the story is told of how Lot and his daughters escape the destruction of Sodom, and find themselves isolated and alone.

There are no other men about.

So the daughters get their father drunk and have sex with him.

They can see no other way to have children.

The Moabites are the offspring of this drunken, incestuous encounter.

No wonder we hate them.

No wonder they are God's washpot.

They deserve it.

So Ruth is not the sweet girl of our Sunday school stories.

Whenever she is mentioned in the text, she is described as a Moabite.

Actually, a Moabite-ess.

Somehow that makes it worse.

We all know what Moabite women are like.

And she acts as we expect Moabites to act.

She comes here, takes our jobs, seduces our men.

We were right to be suspicious of her.

And Naomi is not the sweet mother-in-law of our Sunday school stories either.

She herself is an economic migrant.

She emigrated with her family to Moab when there was famine in Judah.

When there is famine in Moab, she heads back to her home town, Bethlehem, hoping to be looked after there.

When she arrives back in Bethlehem, she is relentlessly negative.

Do not call me Naomi.

Call me bitter, because El Shaddai has dealt bitterly with me.

I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty.

It is, of course, all God's fault.

She is also surprisingly lazy.

Both Ruth and Naomi – as widows and foreigners – are entitled to glean at the edge of the fields under the social code.

But it is Ruth who does all the work – gleaning all day under the hot sun, at risk of sexual harassment from the young men who are bringing in the harvest.

It is Ruth who threshes the barley when she gets it home.

Naomi sits at home doing nothing all day.

And it is Naomi who hatches the seduction plan.

It is she who tells her daughter-in-law to wash, put on her makeup, get dressed in her sexiest clothes, and go down to the threshing floor.

It is she who tells her to wait till Boaz is a bit drunk.

It is she who tells her to uncover his feet – a Hebrew euphemism which you hardly need me to explain to you.

I said earlier that the message of the book – if you read it carefully – is clear.

But not what we think.

So what is the message?

The Sunday school version was about loyalty to your family.

Ruth's promise to stay with her mother-in-law.

The cynical version might be that economic migrancy pays.

That women can usually get what they want if they make a bit of an effort with their appearance.

That men are suckers for nubile girls who throw themselves at them.

I said earlier that the book is about redemption.

Ga 'al.

But as the end of our reading makes clear, it is Naomi who is redeemed.

Not Ruth, who does all the hard work.

Not Boaz, who behaves generously to these two penniless refugees.

But Naomi.

Complaining, workshy, devious Naomi.

Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin.

He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age.

It is Ruth's son who has redeemed Naomi.

A restorer of life.

S'ub.

Nephesh.

He shall restore your soul.

Familiar words from the 23rd Psalm.

Naomi is from Bethlehem, in Judah.

Naomi represents the people of Israel.

Whether the book was written after the exile, or written during the reign of David and rediscovered and edited on coming home from Babylon, it has a message for Naomi's people.

The survivors of exile.

The people who have felt abandoned by God.

The people who were once full, and are now empty.

The people who complain endlessly about how God has abandoned them.

The people who are lazy.

Who are incapable of working their own salvation.

The people who have a history of sexual carelessness.

As so often in the Hebrew Scriptures, redemption comes not because Naomi deserves it.

Not because she behaves well.

Not because she is a holy and good person.

Redemption comes through a foreigner.

Not just any old foreigner, but a hated Moabite.

A refugee.

Someone who is willing to take risks.

Someone who doesn't stick to the rules.

One of the very foreigners whom Ezra and Nehemiah want to cast out of the post-exilic covenant community.

To preserve their identity.

To preserve their purity.

Think again, say the writers and editors of the book of Ruth.

It is these despised foreigners that have brought redemption to the community.

Ruth and Boaz have a son.

They named him Obed.

He became the father of Jesse, the father of David.

Do you remember that verse from Deuteronomy (23.3), where the Lord decrees that no Moabite shall enter into the assembly of the Lord to the 10th generation.

In just three generations a Moabite has given the people of Israel the most glorious king they have ever had.

King David.

And has become part of the family tree of that most famous baby born in Bethlehem.

So today, on Remembrance Sunday, what is this subversive little book saying to us?

To our society?

On September 12th the London District Synod abandoned its business, and went out onto the streets to join the march to Downing Street.

'Refugees welcome' the banners proclaimed.

For a couple of hours on a Saturday afternoon we became part of a movement.

A public debate about refugees.

How many can we afford to let into the UK?

Where will they live?

How will we pay for them?

Can we afford to be generous?

Are other countries doing their fair share?

But the debate was wider than that.

Many people have reminded us that refugees are not just economic hangers-on.

They are people with a rich cultural heritage.

People with intelligence.

With skills and knowledge.

Refugees enrich our country.

Part of our rites of remembrance today should be about the way war opens borders, mixes us up, challenges us to engage with the other.

We remember those who died fighting to preserve freedom.

But we also remember those who lived, those who moved across Europe, those who started afresh in new countries, and those who made their exodus possible.

Sigmund Freud, Yehudi Menuhin, George Solti, Paul Hamlyn, André Deutsch were all 2nd world war refugees.

Anthony Caro, Jacob Epstein, Lucian Freud were all children of refugees.

But it's more than that.

The story of Ruth, the Moabite-ess who redeemed Naomi, reminds us of that familiar fallacy, our favourite place, the moral high ground.

The temptation to be like the scribes in Jesus' teaching, who like to *walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places.*

To have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets.

To assume that they are right.

And everyone else is wrong.

To despise the poor woman putting a couple of copper coins in the treasury.

On remembrance Sunday there is a temptation not just to remember those who died.

But to remember the role of our country in two world wars.

And to assume that what we did was right.

To get all self-righteous about who we are.

And how we should remember.

Yesterday Sienna Miller was heavily criticised for not wearing a poppy on the Graham Norton show.

She took it off, she said, because it was tearing her fragile dress.

But she was treated like the worst kind of traitor.

Jon Snow, the Channel 4 newsreader, has faced similar criticism in the past, and has talked about ‘an unpleasant breed of poppy fascism out there.’

Of course we are proud of the bravery of the armed forces.

But we are also open-eyed about the stupidity, the mistakes, the carelessness of life.

It’s become a truism to argue that the 1st World War was merely an industrial conflict between rival empires.

That the stupidity of the generals caused the millions of deaths of young, working-class men.

But we feel we are on safer ground when it comes to defeating the horrors of the Nazi regime.

Surely we were right to stand against Hitler?

Well, yes, but that doesn’t mean that we behaved perfectly.

The bombing of Dresden, the appalling cost of Hiroshima, are reminders that no one side has a monopoly of good – or evil.

The people of Israel hated the Moabites because they got in their way as they were trying to establish their own territory.

And so they labelled them as evil.

They projected everything bad on to them.

They excluded them from their community.

They banned them from their assemblies.

Moabites are unredeemable.

Yet it was Ruth, the Moabite, who brought redemption.

This subversive little book reminds us not to be too simplistic.

To recognise that taking sides is naïve.

That the world is much more nuanced than that.

That good people can be lazy and careless.

And that bad people can do good.

And that God can be found in all sorts of unexpected people and places.

Let’s remember that too.

Amen.