**6th March 2016**

**Ruth 1 and 2**

If you say the word ‘mother in law’ to a British audience, they will more likely than not, be expecting some joke to follow. On this Mother’s Day it would be insensitive of me to share some amusing quips about mother in-laws.

I did wonder about telling you the story of a big game hunter who goes on safari with his wife and mother in law. One evening the wife wakes up to find her mother gone. She rushes to find her husband he picks up his rifle and they go out to look for her. In a clearing not far from the camp they come upon a chilling sight – the mother in law is backed up against a rock with a fierce lion facing her. ‘Oh no’ cries the wife, ‘what are we going to do?’ ‘Nothing says her husband. ‘That lion got himself into this mess. He can get himself out of it.’

Likewise I thought about making a biblical reference, pointing out that Adam was the only married man in the Bible not to have a mother in law. And he lived in paradise.

But both those jokes are a little prejudiced towards mothers in law so I thought better of it.

Over the next two Sundays we have a story about Ruth and her mother in law. It is a story about a mother’s bitterness and desperation, a story about survival; a story about refugees and foreigners; a story about love, faithfulness and commitment, generosity and kindness. It is one of the most moving and beautiful short stories in the Bible and any preacher worth his salt will just retell and comment on the story : which is what I intend to do.

Ruth is set at a time just before the kings of Israel, roughly about a thousand years before the birth of Jesus. It is written to tell the story of how Ruth will become the great grandmother to King David. It is a story of God’s providence and care. But the story starts with tragedy.

There is famine in the land of Israel and a man called Elimelek decide to up sticks and cross the border to Moab. They were economic migrants – boo hiss! The reality is people who are struggling to survive are desperate and will endure dangerous journeys and hostility from other people because the alternative is death. Elimelek hears that things are better in Moab. There is no love lost between Moab and Israel. It would be humiliating and dangerous to move there but he has to feed his family. It’s interesting how our neighbours are often our bitter rivals. My football team played the east Lancashire derby yesterday. If you live in Burnley and you come across someone who lives in Blackburn, nine miles down the road, you suck your teeth – and vice versa. This was Israel and Moab. But Elimelek does it to survive.

Stephen Moore shared with us last week and he’s coming back this evening to share with the youth, about the plight of the refugees. But he also mentioned the ordeal of people in Dunkirk and Calais having to put up with these muddy chaotic migrant camps on their doorstep. It’s a mess for all concerned he conceded. But less we start complaining about the four thousand or so on our doorstep just remember that of the four million Syrian refugees displaced by their war one million are in camps in Lebanon, next door. Lebanon has a population of just four million. So one in five of that country is a refugee. Any talk of whether our infrastructure and public services can cope with more immigrants is frankly banal compared to the challenges facing Lebanon which is far less developed than we are.

But once they move to Moab Elimelek dies. Did he die of a broken heart, of a sense of failure as the breadwinner, of a sense of shame at having to abandon his farm in the Promised Land? The story doesn’t tell us, partly because it’s a woman’s story. His wife Naomi now hopes her sons will look after her. But they go off and marry Moabite women. What are nice Israelite boys doing marrying Moabite women? In other parts of the Old Testament Moabite women are spoken of in derogatory terms (see Genesis 19.30-38; Numbers 25). These are cross cultural marriages. Different class, religion, background - these relationships bring all those inherent challenges. Did Naomi feel a failure and a sense of shame for having brought up her boys badly that they are not staying true to their faith and identity?

And then her sons die. The story doesn’t give us a time frame but evidently Ruth is still childless, young and eligible when she and Naomi go back to Bethlehem. Isn’t that god’s judgment? That is what one can imagine some people hearing this story would be thinking. ‘You see, they thought they were being clever going to Moab to escape the famine but see where it got them?

. Naomi’s story parallels Jobs. Blow after blow has devastated her life. She had married with such high hopes of her and Elimelek’s making the farm work, raising a family, and she has lost her farm, her extended family, her homeland, her husband and her sons and she is left alone in the foreign country with two foreign daughters in law.

Well the text doesn’t say God was judging Naomi. Like life – stuff happens. It is just one of those things. God is mentioned for the first time in verse 6 as coming to the aid of his people back in Israel and providing food for them. Naomi hears that the famine is over and decides to return to her homeland. It parallels the way we experience our lives, recognizing the importance of coincidences and of human initiatives that you can see, and believing that God may be involved behind the scenes, but not being precise about how or why.

The storyteller does not know how or whether God was involved in the catalogue of negative events with which the story begins – the famine, the leaving, the marriages, the deaths. The story teller does know that the famine comes to an end and says God has visited his people. Usually when the bible talks about God ‘visiting his people’ it’s usually cause for concern – a bit like a visits from the Mafia. It means judgement. It’s safer when God doesn’t visit you or pay attention to you. Keep your head down and get on with life. It’s the attitude many still have today. But this visit is different and the message of the book of Ruth is that god cares and provides.

But Naomi is distraught and bitter. She feels god is against her. As she sets off home her daughter in laws want to come with her and she tries to persuade them not to. Paradoxically these tow daughter n laws who might seem to be the symbol of everything that has gone wrong; are actually the wot people who might be able to help Naomi find healing. Yet sometimes when trouble hits you, you may be afraid to rely on anything positive that is left in your life. Naomi may feel there is a curse on her life. If you stay attached to these two girls will you not lose them too? Better to anticipate the curse.

‘It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord’s hand is against me!’ cries Naomi. Later in this chapter she says the almighty has made my life very bitter. The Lord has afflicted me and brought misfortune upon me.

Last week I spoke at the United Lent Service about Psalm 13. Psalm 13 is a lament – How Long O Lord have you forgotten me? How long will you hide your face from me’ it goes on. It expresses anger, despair, and frustration to God. I suggested it is a no holds barred rant that clears the air and gets things off the writer’s chest.

Naomi believes that God has just let her life fall apart and she’s not afraid to say so. The Psalms will suggest that it is okay to speak the way she does, though they may also suggest that it is a shame that she is not saying all this to God and not just about God. She talks a bit about God in expressing her wishes about her daughters in law and what has happened to her; but she cannot talk to God about it. When your life is collapsing there is nothing you can do but to protest. Job and the Psalms offer models for the way you can go about that but Naomi has not reached the point where she can lift her voice and protest to God. Don’t complain to other people. Be sure to complain to God. Don’t grumble about God. Grumble to God. He’s big enough; he can handle it. It clears the air and once honesty has been achieved God can do something. God will do something with Naomi that will gradually thaw her resentment. Instead of letting that bitterness fester it may have been better for her to have been upfront about it right at the start.

Naomi tries to dissuade her daughters in law from coming back to Israel with her. They are Moabites so have options one to them. She persuades Orpah to stay in Moab.

By the way many mispronounce Orpah as Oprah – because of the famous celebrity Oprah Winfrey. Oprah was actually named Orpah after the character in this story but people kept mispronouncing her name so her family gave in and changed it. You can’t blame Orpah for staying. She respected her own family traditions.

What is remarkable is that Ruth decides to go with Naomi. . She pledges to her mother in law that your people will be my people and your God will be my God. Ruth expresses a radical commitment to membership of Naomi’s family and to Naomi’s God. She steps out in faith and trust. She will not be disappointed. When you are in desperate situations, pray, protest even to God but then trust. Trust that god works for good. Trust that God redeems. Trust that god will provide.

Let’s see what happens when Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem in Israel. They turn up at harvest time Ruth goes out to harvest field and began to glean behind the harvesters. She finds herself in Boaz’s field. When we were in Israel last summer we saw the traditional site in Bethlehem called Boaz’s field and hopefully our pilgrimage in November will visit this spot too, which is opposite to the shepherd’s fields.

Boaz appears to be a big landowner who employs people to harvest his fields. The story of how the Israelites settled in the land of Canaan in the book of Joshua related how the land was supposed to be distributed around clans and families. There was not supposed to be big landowners. Everything was supposed to be equal and fair – n idyllic socialistic society. But as we know from our own attempts at socialism things don’t stay equal and fair for long. Maybe Boaz has done well out of the famine; maybe he was a better famer or had been better at saving for a time when the harvest might fail and ended up taking control of more land of other people who were not so organised or careful or efficient or lucky. What his story then shows is power and resources are things that you can use in a selfish fashion or in a way that shows great commitment. There is a hint of that in the mutual blessing Boaz gives to his workers and their greeting back. It indicates good relationships with his employees.

Boaz sees this foreign girl and asks his worker who does this young woman belong to?

It could seem like the typical guy question: he fancies the new chick he’s not seen around here before and wonders if she is attached. But maybe that is too Western a way of reading it. The story portrays Boaz as a quite honourable man who wouldn’t think in those terms. He is a real M Darcy.

The background to the story is the bible’s concern for those in need. Particularly the poor and the widows. In our culture we assume everything has to be done with maximum efficiency. When economic conditions are tough, companies let people off and they have to fend for themselves. What else can companies do? If they fail to take such action, the companies themselves will fold. The need to take that kind of action is built into the system. It produces growth and achievement but also suffering. The system in a traditional society has the opposite advantages and disadvantages. One aspect is that the harvesters who ae reaping the grain don’t do it too efficiently. They leave something behind for people who don’t belong to regular families and don’t have fields they can farm and therefore no means of supporting themselves. Boaz therefore makes sure he doesn’t just think about what he can get out of society but also about what he can give to society. Had he been living today – no doubt he would have gladly paid his corporate tax and been a philanthropist.

He bumps into Rut. It is one of those coincidences, hinted at earlier when Rut goes to gleam in part of a field that belonged to someone related to her father in law. It is now made clear what the implication of this coincidence is. Naomi and Ruth had not prayed that Ruth wold be led to the right field, but Ruth simply ‘happened to end up in the best field possible and now she meets up with Boaz.

It was a coincidence that I met my wife. I got into trouble at my wedding speech for describing it in the following way: I was training for ministry in Manchester and I was visiting a friend on Nottingham and still grieving that I had split up with a girlfriend four months earlier. He said it was a pity I didn’t go to his church in Nottingham as there were a lot of eligible girls there and he listed a few that I vaguely knew including a Debbie Pitt. We went along to the evening service and whilst their morning service had about 400 people at it the evening service was more intimate with about 50 people. But this attractive beautiful girl came and sat next to me. Debbie was also at service that evening! She was the girl who came and sat next to me! That coincidence has of course changed my life. I dare say you have your own stories. I know some call those moments ‘Godincidecnes’ - they seem to have been arranged.

Boaz has heard about Ruth’s kindness, love and devotion to Naomi and is impressed by it. He reassures her that his harvesters will be leaving lots of the crops for her to glean.

It is enough to turn Naomi her mother in law, around. She can pray and praise again. It turns out that god had not given up on a commitment to her and her family after all. Boaz is a close relative, described in our version of the bible as a ‘guardian redeemer’. That phrase refers to a person in Old Testament times who was outside your family, who if trouble came upon you was obliged to help you out. The nice man who has been so caring about Ruth turns out to be a person in that position in re4ation to Ruth and Naomi. What a coincidence.

Boaz has earlier said that Ruth should be rewarded for looking after her mother in law. The God under whose wings you have come to take refuge. It’s a beautiful image imagining chicks hiding behind their mother hen’s feathers. It could also be translated as skirts so could apply to children hiding behind their mothers skirts. In the next chapter Ruth will turn Boaz’s words back on him as she takes refuge under his skirt. But more of those romantic deeds next week.

Ruth has not just stayed a foreigner in a strange land, a refugee and beggar. She has taken action and has joined the community and shares in their relationship to God. She is discovering the God who is our refuge and strength and who offers shelter under her wings. May we find shelter to in the wings of God.