

Sermon series on Ruth.

Week 1: 7.2.16

COMMITMENT

Rev Louise Franklin.

1. Background to the God of the story

God is a Velcro God. A God who sticks by us.

God is a Velcro God, He is faithful to us and our need for Him. Ruth is our story is a Velcro woman – she sticks by Naomi like glue – or indeed Velcro!

Kindness

This book brimming over with kindness.

1:8 for instance as Naomi turns to her two daughters-in-law she says: ‘ May the Lord show kindness to you...’ In the original that word is ‘hesed’. It could be rendered kindness or even generosity, but it may also be translated ‘unfailing love’ .

It is the term used of God himself to describe his commitment to his people. It is the untiring love of a mother for her child, a husband for his wife, a love which will simply not let go - a clinging love. The love our Velcro God has for us.

2. Background to the story

The people in the story

An ordinary couple, Naomi and Elimelech leave Bethlehem to escape from famine. They are on the brink of starvation and seek refuge in more prosperous lands. They find refuge in Moab. It’s a time of darkness for Israel as a nation –dark days for Israel when people lived as they saw fit – as it says in Judges 17:6. There were some who still believed and were faithful to God. Naomi and Elimelech leave Israel and take with them their two sons to look for a brighter life. The brightness does not last long, Elimelech dies. Naomi is left a Widow. There is some joy, her sons meet and marry, Orpah and Ruth. But the joy is relatively short lived, a decade or so later the story sadly continues. And the two boys’ names give away what will happen next – in Hebrew they are called Mahlon and Kilion which mean meant sickly and wasting away. No prizes as to what happens next for Mr Sickly and Mr Wasting Away. They also die. It’s a family story of bereavement upon bereavement.

In Ruth names are significant -Naomi means ‘pleasant’. But by the time she returns home to Bethlehem she is a changed character entirely v19b-20 . ‘When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, "Can this be Naomi?" "Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter.’ Why, she was hardly recognisable as the same woman that left those ten long years ago. Oh deary me.

This in a way is a bit of a prodigal daughter story – it’s to the Velcro God, all powerful, all knowing, all loving to which she decides to return.

3. Physical Homecomings and Spiritual Ones

Ruth and Orpah were faced with a choice on the road from Moab to Bethlehem

Ruth 1:8,9 “And Naomi said to her two daughters in law, Go, return each to her mother’s house. The LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The LORD grant that you may find rest, each in the house of her husband.”

Orpah walked away from Naomi.

Ruth 1:14 says, “. . . but Ruth clung to her.”

And when the Bible says that Ruth clung to her, it uses a word that speaks not only of Ruth's love and affection for Naomi, but also of her loyalty, her total commitment. It is the word used in Genesis 2:24, in the context of marriage, where it says that a man shall leave his father's house and be joined to or to cleave to, to cling to, his wife. It is also the word used to describe how we are to be joined to the LORD. For example in Deuteronomy 30:20 the people of Israel are called to

"... love the LORD your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days."

This clinging then, it's a covenant word, it is like the language of marriage 'For better for worse, for richer for poorer' 'I will.'

'Your people will be my people, your God will be my God.' It is a personal conversion.

4. Their commitment and ours

It was the promise that God made to Abraham when he said that he had a plan and a purpose for his life...

Leave your country, your relatives, and your father's house, and go to the land that I will show you. Gen 12:1

And to Joshua as he was about to lead the people of Israel into the Promised Land, after the death of Moses... "Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the LORD your God is with you wherever you go." Josh.1:9

And through the prophet Isaiah: "Do not be afraid, for I have ransomed you. I have called you by name; you are mine. When you go through deep waters and great trouble, I will be with you." (Is.43:1-12)

And Jesus made the same promise to all who are his friends "... be sure of this: I am with you always... (Matthew 28:20)

Ruth models a stickability and a commitment to Naomi which I think is a model for our faith.

5. What's your commitment like?

What's your faithfulness to the God who sticks by you like? Do you trust in his goodness, in his love, trust that he has the power to make all things work together for good; trust in all the promises that he has made to us.

The book of Ruth is also the story of god's grace in the mist of difficult circumstances. Even in times of crisis in deepest despair, there are those who follow God and for whom God works. The matter how discouraging for antagonistic the world may seem, there are always people who follow God. He will use anyone who is open to him to achieve his purposes.

"Here is a play with four characters. Character number one is a prostitute. Character number two is her son. By the time we meet him he is wealthy, powerful and single. Character three is a foreign widow living in a clannish culture. Everything about her is different, her accent, her name, her food. Her only friend is her mother in law who happens also to be a widow and happens to be character number four, older than the first, too old for kids, When her two sons die, she is left alone with only a foreigner for a friend. Four people. Each rejected. Each alone. Four frazzled strings at the bottom of the knitting basket. Left untouched, awaiting the toss of the master-weaver. But he doesn't discard them. He picks them up and weaves them together. " (The Inspiration Bible New Century Version)