

Sermon Series—Women in the Bible

Ruth.

I would like to tell you a story: a traditional extended Jewish family headed by the patriarch Elimelech move to Moab to escape a famine, thus becoming foreigners. Elimelech dies, his two sons marry Moabite women, one of who is Ruth. The family remains in Moab for around ten years before Ruth's husband and her brother in law subsequently die. Naomi the matriarch of the family resolves to move back home where the famine has ended. Ruth pledges to stay with, and support her mother in law Naomi, vowing to convert to the Jewish faith. Both move back to Bethlehem. Here she collects fallen grain in the fields of a related man named Boaz to survive. On Naomi's instruction she seduces and marries Boaz, producing a son. The son is raised by Naomi is the grandfather of King David.

The period in which much of the books of the bible were written was a violent time and in particular the life of non-Jews in the Old Testament was often counted cheap, with numerous accounts of wars which were genocidal, with whole tribes exterminated because of their ethnic origins.

The nation was obsessed with racial purity, the Old Testament is full of laws and practices to guarantee it, the fear of the outsider was a constant paranoia and added to this Jewish society was a pyramid shape headed by those Jewish males in positions of wealth and honour . Everyone in society was ranked in a descending order of importance with 'the foreigner' being the lowest of the low.

The book of Leviticus 25:44-46 says anyone who is not a Jew can potentially be taken as a slave.

Not only did this make life hard for those living within Israel it al-

so made the nation of Israel pretty unpopular with its neighbours, neighbours like the region of Moab who had been Israel's enemy for decades.

However, this doesn't prevent Elimelech's family moving to Moab to seek sanctuary among foreigners in their time of trial and remaining there for ten years; it seems even though they were now outsiders they felt sufficiently welcome to have stayed even after the head of the household, Elimelech, dies. At this point it would have seemed prudent for Naomi and her two sons to move back to Judah to locate wives to secure the family line, but they marry the Moabite women: Ruth and Orpan even though the book of Deuteronomy forbids Jews marrying outside of their own faith. It seems strange that these two Moabite women are welcomed into this traditional Jewish family, unless perhaps because of the family's experience of Moabite culture and hospitality during their stay the family had decided to override the Law when choosing their wives.

Having married into this new family, despite the death of her husband, Ruth remains with Naomi, even accepting her faith when her husband dies. Ruth then leaves her own nation to return to a very uncertain future in a foreign land. Naomi is angry and bitter at a god who she believes has treated her poorly, but Ruth doesn't complain, instead she pledges faithfulness to the very same God.

Returning with Naomi to a foreign land and having converted to the Jewish faith and proven loyal to her family it is easy to imagine Ruth's life would have been easier, but no, they are destitute, not Naomi's family or any other Jews provide for the two widows. It is possible that Naomi is ignored by her family because she has brought shame on them by leaving Israel and returned with a Moabite. Whatever the reason, it is Ruth who has to expose herself to physical danger of assault in the fields gleaning for food when their finances run out.

Even when Boaz takes her as his wife the language of the slave is

used, Boaz says

‘I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite, the wife of Mahlon, to be my wife’

(Ruth 4:9-10).

‘I have acquired Ruth?’ Like a piece of property, something to be bought like Elimelech’s land and still referred to as ‘The Moabite’. Despite all she has done for the family she is still considered the foreigner. Boaz is trapped in his way of thinking, unlike Ruth he simply cannot see beyond his bigotry and prejudice.

I love the Book of Ruth, from the outset the book of Ruth is a spiritual journey of individuals outside of their comfort zones, into difficult and foreign landscapes where they behave in astonishing ways which defy convention, and once again it is women who are changing the world.

It is a book where those people who are considered unworthy are the people who show love and kindness, who sacrifice what little they have for others and place themselves in hardship and danger: the kindness of the Moabites accepting the large Jewish family in their midst and allowing two of their own to marry into this family, the kindness of Ruth leaving her homeland to return to Israel with Naomi where she knows she will be regarded as lower than a slave, and then giving up her child with Boaz so Naomi can have a son who will care for her.

She succeeds in protecting Naomi and herself from the worst that the culture could threaten and through bravery and intelligence with the help of Naomi changes the course of the history for the Jewish nation. She is the hero of this story and a commentator writes:

‘She stands at the gates of the city of Bethlehem, newly returned to the place of her birth, broadly experienced and immensely wiser than her peers. She has known death and gone on living. She has been struck down and refused to quit. She has looked square into the face of a bleak future and determined to shape it herself.

We live in time of unprecedented change and amid calls to close our hearts and minds to those who are different to us, different because of their skin colour, their ethnic origin, the religion, culture, sexuality or gender, Ruth has much to say to us about stepping out of our comfort zones to welcome those who are marginalised.

Naomi and her family stepped out of their comfort zone to experience the life and culture of 'the other'; it turned out to be more of a blessing that they could have imagined.

By welcoming in 'the outsider' the tragedy in Naomi's life was mitigated and by the working together of two individuals marginalised by society lives were dramatically improved and the future immeasurably changed for the better as the child they raised together became the grandfather of David and an ancestor of Jesus.