

Ruth and Boaz

Ruth 2:1-12
Matthew 1:1-6

Over a period of weeks we explored 1 Corinthians 13, the famous passage from St. Paul on love. It occurred to the group planning our themes that to go on and explore love in the lives of real couples from the bible would be interesting and informative.

I know Chris enjoyed exploring the complicated love life of Jacob.

Rogan took on the less than simple relationship between Abraham and Sarah.

Terry has the unusual task of speaking about Mary and Joseph in September and not December as we normally would.

Today we have three love stories in one small book.

Naomi and God

Ruth and Naomi

Ruth and Boaz

I do believe there is a genuine love story here, with a growing attraction between Boaz and Ruth however, the aspects of love most obvious in the story are loyalty, respect and duty.

Verse 7 of 1 Corinthians 13 is reflected throughout the book of Ruth – love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

I'll quickly recap the story

Elimelech and his wife Naomi and their two sons. They have land near Bethlehem but a famine devastates the area and they move as migrants to Moab. While there the two sons marry Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth.

Long story short – Elimelech and his two sons all die leaving Naomi a widow, in a foreign land with two foreign daughters-in-

law. She has no rights. No land. No relatives. No expectation of support so she determines to return to Bethlehem where the famine has passed and so she dismisses her daughters in law.

It's worth knowing that among the Jewish people there was an expectation that if a married man died without any children his brother would take the widowed wife as his own so that she might have children and through those children allow the family line of the deceased to continue and to own the land. If there was no other brother then this expectation would pass to near relatives.

Naomi has no more sons and she tells her daughters in law to return to their fathers homes.

Orpah leaves but Ruth is having none of it and our love story begins here, not yet between Ruth and Boaz but in the love Ruth shows to Naomi.

¹⁶ But Ruth said,

“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.

¹⁷ Where you die, I will die—

there will I be buried.
May the Lord do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!”

Ruth and Boaz

Ruth embodies the deep qualities of love we explored in 1 Corinthians 13 in particular her deep commitment to her mother in law and a desire to come under the authority of Naomi's God.

She shows loyalty but also duty. She's allowing herself to be part of the Jewish system that means a relative of Naomi's could take Ruth as a wife so that she might have children so that Elimelech's family line continues and they continue to own the land. Love motivates her to stay with Naomi and face an unknown future.

Another story worth pursuing through the four chapters is Naomi's faith. Even though her life becomes bitter and she believes God has taken much from her, she remains steadfast in her faith. When things begin to improve she is quickly ready to praise God. Through tragedy and blessing she remains faithful and this faithfulness has impressed Ruth. Despite things going badly, Ruth too wants to be part of God's people - your God is my God.

We would all find it easy to witness to the goodness of God when we experience blessing. But faithfulness to God when times are tough is a true witness and more impressive. When health fails, business fails, relationships struggle and disaster strikes, to say - I believe that God is good - is the most magnificent witness.

Ruth stays with Naomi - they return to Bethlehem and its time for the Barley harvest.

Boaz has already heard of Ruth's loyalty to Naomi so he is already predisposed to think kindly towards Ruth but I cannot interpret his actions in any other way than a man falling in love with someone he respects and admires. I have no idea whether either of them was physically attractive, the romantic in us all would imagine the scene as if they were, but clearly he respects

Ruth and is impressed by Ruth. But this is a very regulated society, and duty comes before attraction.

Even so, Boaz does what he can for Ruth

He instructs her to follow his reapers and stay with his servant women.

He warns the young men to leave her alone.

At the meal time he provides generously for her.

He tells his men to leave extra handfuls of barley lying around for Ruth to find.

He tells her to only glean in his fields with his servant girls.

Towards the end of the harvest Naomi decides it's time to act and make it clear to Boaz that if he can fulfil his duty towards his kinswoman, it will be favourably received.

She advises Ruth to wash and anoint herself, dress to kill (you read it for yourselves!) and go and lie down near Boaz who has enjoyed the end of harvest celebration.

He wakes in the night to find a woman lying next to him and on asking who she is Ruth replies... "I am Ruth, your servant; spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin.

It's a euphemism for "take me as your wife".

I don't think Boaz is disappointed in the slightest but his words show how deeply he loves the character and commitment of this "foreign" woman.

He said, "May you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter; this last instance of your loyalty is better than the first; you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. ¹¹ And now, my daughter, do not be afraid, I will do for you all that you ask, for all the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman.

Ruth and Boaz

Well I hope you will take the time to read the four chapters of the story for yourselves, you'll discover what happens, how Boaz fulfils his duty although I suspect it is a very great joy and Ruth gives birth to a son named Obed.

Obed becomes the father of Jesse and Jesse the father of King David.

As an aside, in the genealogy of Jesus in the gospel of Matthew are all manner of characters including Rahab the prostitute as well as Ruth the foreign woman from Moab.

Its tempting to look for love in the bible as romantic love and of all our couples thus far perhaps only Jacob and Rachel and Ruth and Boaz have come the closest, but love is so much wider than just romantic love.

Duty, responsibility, commitment, respect are all shown in todays story reminding us of – love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

But as I conclude it's not Ruth and Boaz who have stayed with me through this week, but Naomi. Whether living as a migrant, bereaved, facing the bitterness of loss and uncertainty of the future, she clings onto her faith in God. I'm sure she could have echoed the words of one of our songs, "Blessed be you name when I'm found in a desert place, though I walk through the wilderness, blessed be your name".

This is love to a great depth, a commitment to God even when life is a struggle, a belief that God will be faithful even when circumstances would show the opposite.