

RUTH
LOVE AND LOYALTY

We like stories with happy endings! There is something about a happy ending that leaves us with a good feeling; we read a book, or watch a film and engage with the character and hope that it turns out all right for them in the end; we feel cheated almost if the endings are not happy. It is the last episode of *Downton Abbey* tonight: will there be happy endings for the characters in all the threads of the story? Or will some be left hanging so that the third series might pick them up again next year? If you watch the classic Disney cartoons, like *Snow White* or *Cinderella* they all have happy endings; they take us into some dark places along the way and they all have moments when you wonder whether these are suitable for small children, but they all turn out well in the end. We love stories that end “they all lived happily ever after”.

The problem is that these stories are not always connected to the real world in which we live. Not every real-life story has a happy ending; some real-life stories have anything but a happy ending. When we're in the midst of our real-life stories, we wonder what on earth the ending will be! For Christians, there's another layer to these real-life stories and that is 'where is God?' in our stories. The expectation for Christians is that because of Christian faith and because God is involved in these stories that they must be happy! “If God is with us, He will make us glad and happy and everything will be fine; nothing bad will touch us!” There is a rude awakening for us when we find that the very opposite is true and there are times when we feel 'alone in the unfeeling immensity of the universe'. “It's evening, it's dark and I'm afraid.” It is arguably the hardest of all for us to sustain faith in days when things go badly for us; we suffer and hurt and we pray and God seems not to be there any more. How do we live by faith when the world is hard?

The story of Ruth is a great little story. It is a story with a happy ending and it is not giving too much away to say that Ruth marries Boaz and they have a son who will be part of the family tree of the great King David and later of Jesus. But it is also a real-life story and we'll look at that in a moment; there is no way that we could consider Ruth as living in anything but the real world. It is a story of love and loyalty, of faith and determination in the face of some really hard things, really difficult circumstances. Above all, at a time when it seems as if God has gone away and left Ruth and her mother-in-law to suffer and struggle, God is there and Ruth's faith shines through.

There is a happy ending, but it takes us through some dark places to get there. There are three things:

- **Famine** – This is not unusual even in our world. Look at East Africa: crops have failed and millions of people have been forced to move from their homes to refugee camps looking for food. It is hard for us to understand when there is so much food in Tesco or Sainsbury's, but famine is the reality for many people in our world. It was the reality of life for Naomi and Elimelech and their two sons and so this little family leaves Bethlehem to go across the border into Moab because there is food there. While there, the two sons grow up and marry Orpah and Ruth, Moabite women. Later when they came back to Bethlehem, the two women are poor; they have no man to look after them, so Ruth gleans round edges of the fields and finds what grain she can so that they have something to eat.
- **Bereavement** – not one, not even two, but three bereavements happen in this little family. All the men die. Elimelech dies first and Naomi is left without her husband; but then her two sons die tragically; we're not told what caused them to die and it doesn't

really matter. We see something of the spirit this brings out in her when she has gone back to Bethlehem: “*Don’t call...*” (1:20f) and it is a quite understandable reaction; she is telling it like it is and how she feels and the Old Testament has no qualms in saying that God has done this and Naomi has no qualms about expressing her bitterness and her grief.

- **Judges ruled** – these are days when faith was under trial. There were days when God was seen to be living and active, strong and powerful, but there were other days when it seemed as if the culture of the people around them was more attractive and the draw to abandon their faith had a stronger pull. The nation was split; the people were being pulled in two directions: to keep faith with God? Or to go with the other culture? This made faith harder to live out and to sustain!

How did Ruth and Naomi deal with all of this? It would be so easy to see them simply drift off into their fear and bitterness; it is such a common story in our world, of people who face up to these kinds of hardships and their faith is submerged by their fears; their deepest sense of God is one of abandonment and isolation. Yet, some of the most profound declarations of faith that I have read have come from people who have faced up to these kinds of difficulties: Rwandan Christians in the aftermath of the genocide in 1991 declaring their unity in Christ and that God has sustained them; people suffering famine, telling the world that they know God will provide. So it is possible to face up to hard things in life and hold on to Christian faith! Let’s see how Ruth managed it!

“*Where you...*” (1:16f) These are the big words in Ruth’s story. Two commitments she declares and it is these two commitments that show us a person who is able to remember what is important, even in the darkest times of her life. She declares a commitment to Naomi – “*where you...*” and a commitment to God “*Your God...*” It is these two declarations that show us Ruth’s heart.

A Love-story: the story is full of relationships. The best and biggest impression from Ruth is that it is all about people. “*Where you...*” (1:16) describes the relationship between the two women in the story, Ruth and her mother-in-law; despite Naomi’s best efforts to send her back to her own people, Ruth stays with Naomi; they support one another – Ruth gleanes under Naomi’s guidance; Ruth searches out Boaz under Naomi’s guidance. The two women support each other and depend on each other for their survival in the most difficult times of their lives. They support each other in bereavement, in hunger and poverty; in the solution to their circumstances. They love and care for each other in a most powerful way. Then there’s Ruth’s relationship with Boaz – a real love story in the end. Boaz is family; Ruth gleanes in his field and he makes sure that she has plenty to grain to find. The ultimate solution to the women’s situation is in his hands and he takes that responsibility and makes sure that they are protected, supported and in the end, the relationship between Ruth and Boaz leads to marriage and family. Here are people supporting one another, committed to one another’s well-being, looking out for one another.

It’s fascinating to watch people react to difficult situations; we do it in different ways. One of the keys to our survival is other people and the support they give us; we are one of the keys to other people’s survival because of the support we give them. Church is family; Church is the community of faith and love and that is supposed to mean a network of support and love for one another. You’ve seen the penguins in the Antarctic winter: one on its own will die of cold; so they huddle together for warmth, and even take turns on the outside bearing the brunt of the wind, then back inside to warm up again; so

they all survive! But there are two other dynamics at work in us: 1)we withdraw from Church when we're going through tough times; just when we need the support most, you would think, we stop coming; we cut ourselves off from our Christian friends and something must be lost in that; or if we don't stop altogether, we keep our troubles secret; 2)we trample all over those who suffer, we criticise them, we blame them, we gossip about them in the most unfeeling and uncaring way. At its best, the Church is a community where we try to put ourselves in the other person's place to understand their situation as best we can, so treat one another with compassion, understanding and grace; the community where we listen to one another, a safe space where people can express their grief or their bitterness in any way they like without guilt, recrimination or gossip; a place where we pray for one another, where we show support for one another in all kinds of other ways too. There is no more lonely place to be when "It's evening, it's dark and I'm afraid" yet the love of our Christian family can support and sustain us in the most profound ways. Ruth is a love-story: we live out faith together! We find strength and solidarity together!

A Faith-story: "*May you...*" (2:12) Here is a picture that the Bible loves; God is like the mother-bird who gathers her chicks under her wings to protect them. Birds will try all sorts of things to protect their young, diversion tactics, outright attack and gathering them under their wings, so that anyone who wants to attack the young birds won't find them! Ruth has found her protection and salvation with God. For all that she has been through and the times when Naomi has described herself as bitter, yet God is there; God is with them and provides for them all that they need. Ruth has learned to trust God with her whole life. It is so easy and too common to blame God for our hard circumstances – "he should have stopped it!" - and so we complain through our tears and God seems a million miles away, and we feel 'alone in the unfeeling immensity of the universe'.

Here's a thing: the God to whom we pray, in whom we place our trust, has shaped His relationship to our world most of all through the cross! The God to whom we pray and in whom we place our hope could have stopped the suffering of His Son, but chose not to; He chose to define His relationship to our world by the suffering of Christ on the cross. The cross shows us God who loves us so profoundly; the cross shows us that God understands what it is to grieve and to mourn; the cross shows us that God tasted what it's like to be alone in the dark; Jesus knows what it's like to feel that God is a million miles away! It is to this God that we come when life is hard; it is under the shadow of the wings of the crucified Saviour that we come to find refuge. The unseen reality is of God who protects us and provides for us in all times of our lives, who is faithfully at work on our behalf.

People committed to care for one another, people who support one another, and who are ready to be supported by others, in mutual love and understanding. People seeing the faithfulness of God, that God is their support and their refuge and they are learning to trust God. This is the story of Ruth, a great story of love and loyalty, of faith and determination in the face of many difficulties. How do we live out Christian faith in our hard world? We do it together; we find support and love from one another. We trust God, even in the darkness; He is still there, even if we find Him hard to see. We hold on to what is important: love and loyalty, faith and determination. Ruth is a real story with a happy ending; may ours be too!