

## Influencers: Ruth

As we have gone through the current Coronavirus pandemic, amongst the sea of bad news that has been coming out – there have been some good news stories as well as we have seen people go the extra mile to help those around them. From the story of 100 year old Captain Tom Moore – now Captain Sir Tom – and his incredible fund raising for the NHS to 6-year-old Callaghan McLaughlin who decided to spread joy in his community by setting up a “drive-by joke stand” so he could make his neighbours laugh while respecting social distancing guidelines. In some cases we have seen people make incredible sacrifices to protect others, such as at Sheffield’s Bridgedale House care home where care assistants made the difficult decision to move into the home to protect their residents from COVID-19 and reduce the risk of exposure. This meant that for the staff – some of whom stayed there for over a month – they were separated from their families and friends, missing birthdays and other important events. It was not expected of them to do this and not part of their job but they made the sacrifice because they felt it was the right thing to do.

Today, we carry on our series looking at Influencers in the Bible by looking at Ruth. Her story is told in the book of Ruth from which we just read and I would encourage you to take time to read the whole story – it is only 4 chapters – to allow you to fully appreciate the power of Ruth and the influence that she continues to have today. Ruth was from Moab, in what is now Jordan, and in Ruth 1 we read that she married one of the sons of Naomi but after the deaths of Naomi’s husband and sons, Naomi decides to return to her home town of Bethlehem in Judah. When she encourages her daughters in law to return to their families and their own people, Ruth refuses – she loves her mother-in-law so much that she is prepared to leave her own family and her people, the Moabites, to stay with Naomi and travel with her to Bethlehem. In this we see some similarities with Abraham who we looked at last week – leaving the certainty of their own family behind and taking the risk of moving to a new land. But unlike Abraham, Ruth is leaving something else behind – in verse 16 of Chapter 1 we hear Ruth say to Naomi *“Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.”* She is choosing to follow God over the idols that the Moabites believed in

There would have been many voices around her which were telling her to do what they thought was right for her to do and what was expected of her – which would have been to return to her people and to find a Moabite husband – Naomi is one of these voices. Ruth has no obligation whatsoever to help or continue with Naomi but instead of doing what others expected her to do Ruth does what she feels is the right thing to do – to stay with Naomi, return with her to Bethlehem and to embrace Naomi’s true God as her Lord.

Ruth could have allowed these voices and her own doubt to influence her to leave Naomi. But instead her heart focuses on what she believes is right. She felt a deep conviction that she was to stay with Naomi. And she followed that conviction.

When we know something is right, like Ruth, our conviction should encourage us to follow through on it. But this can seem difficult in the society in which we live, where there are lots of voices telling us to do otherwise. Others may second-guess our thinking and our decision-making. But when we know what’s right, we can’t let those things throw us off. We need to stand by our convictions.

By doing what she knows to be right and being faithful to God by going with Naomi to Bethlehem, the influence that Ruth had on others grew. We see this with Boaz’s words to Ruth in verses 11 and 12 of Chapter

*“I’ve been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband—*

*how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. <sup>12</sup> May the LORD repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.”*

By rights, as an Israelite, Boaz should have avoided Ruth. Those of you who are up on your Old Testament law will know that Deuteronomy Chapter 23 discourages any friendly relations with Moabites. But Boaz can see God at work in the way that Ruth has looked after her mother-in-law and the qualities which she demonstrates in her life - being kind, faithful, brave, loving and hard working. Qualities which she has displayed consistently.

Paul said in our call to worship:

*“We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.”  
(2 Corinthians 5:20)*

As Christians we are commanded to reflect Christ and his characteristics in the way that we live our lives – to have influence for Christ we have to be like Ruth and demonstrate the characteristics of Christ to those around us – those who we meet at work, at school, at home, in church – by consistently living out the qualities that the examples I gave at the beginning of this talk demonstrated, that Ruth demonstrated, that Christ demonstrated we show the world around us what Christ is like and, sometimes in ways we don’t understand or even recognise, influence the lives of those that see us. Whether that is by not cutting corners in the work that we do, helping those around us even when we have no obligation to, forgiving those that have wronged us, remaining faithful even when we are facing difficult times, we show Christ through our lives.

For Ruth, the faith that she demonstrates is rewarded. As widows, she and Naomi were in one of the worst positions they could be in in the ancient world and as a result were very poor which is why Ruth goes to the field owned by Boaz to pick up leftover grain. During the harvest, Israelite law demanded that the corners of the fields should not be harvested and any grain that was dropped was to be left for those who were poor to use for food. Through the influence she had on Boaz through the kindness she had shown to his relative Naomi, Boaz goes far beyond the intent of this law and himself demonstrates qualities of kindness and generosity in the way that he treats Ruth, not only allowing her to gather the leftover grain but telling his workers to let some of the grain fall in her path. Again, he did not have any obligation to help her in this way, but he chooses to do what he recognises is the right thing to do, even though it would cost him some of his harvest. When we have opportunities to help others, it can be tempting sometimes to do the minimum we need to, but Boaz’s example shows us God’s calling to do beyond what others might do if it allows us to help others.

The remainder of the book shows that Ruth continues to have an influence on Boaz and ultimately they are married. In many ways the book of Ruth is a love story – love runs through it with Ruth’s love for Naomi and Boaz’s love for Ruth – but over all of this we see God’s love for all - both for his chosen people like Naomi and Boaz but also for gentiles or non-Jews such as Ruth, a Moabite. At the very end of the book we learn that Ruth and Boaz had a son, Obed. Obed’s grandson David would go on to become King David, the celebrated King of the Israel who delivered God’s people from their enemies and from whose descendants would eventually come the Son of God, Jesus Christ.

As well as the influence she has through her familial connection to Christ, Ruth’s story also influences us through the way that it foretells the story of Christ. There are some more obvious connections such as the setting of Bethlehem where Christ was to be born but in Boaz we also see some important parallels to the redemption that Christ offers. You’ll be pleased to hear that I don’t have the time this morning to go into detail about Old Testament law but I have prepared a note that I will make available

on the website, Facebook and Youtube after for anyone who is interested. But for Boaz to marry Ruth he had to become her kinsman redeemer – who was someone with an obligation to redeem a relative facing extreme hardship. By taking on this role Boaz was a qualified redeemer: he was a family member, he had the means of purchasing Naomi's land, he had the willingness to buy the land and marry Ruth. This is the most important image of Christ in the story as it foretells what Jesus will do for us:

- Coming to Earth to become one of us and live amongst us
- Shedding blood on the cross to allow him to redeem us
- Going to the cross willingly, sacrificing himself so that we may be redeemed.

Jesus Christ is the great Redeemer, and the book of Ruth foreshadows His work.

So why did I pick Ruth for this series on influencers? For a start, there is nothing that marks her out as special – to an external observer she is an ordinary woman – but an ordinary woman who faces one of the toughest challenges in life when she becomes a widow at a young age. In the face of what had happened to her we could understand if she turned her back on God – the God of her husband's people not her own remember – and that is what we see those around her encourage her to do but instead we see the opposite. She puts her faith in God into action displaying kindness and loyalty to her mother-in-law and through the way she lives out her faith is recognised by Boaz and others in Bethlehem as someone of noble character and in doing so sets an example which should influence us today. Where many voices tell us to think only of ourselves Ruth shows us the importance of doing what is right and living by faith. And this faith is rewarded in Ruth's case – I cannot believe that it is coincidence that it is Boaz's field that she goes to, setting off a series of actions which will one day lead to the birth of Christ. God was at work, and without her knowing it, Ruth became part of his plan not just to redeem her but to redeem the world.

Last week we looked at Abraham and the big risk that he took in faith because God promised to make him into a great nation and to bless him. Ultimately, the same would happen to Ruth but when she takes a risk in faith, she doesn't do it because God explicitly commanded her to but because her faith told her it was the right thing to do which for me is even more impressive. It sets a challenging example for us to follow but reminds us that we cannot second guess how God will use us. He might call us to do something big – set up a nation like Abraham – or something small like taking care of someone we love and showing kindness to others like Ruth.

I spoke of Captain Tom at the beginning – when he started walking around his garden, he couldn't have known that his action would lead to millions being raised for the NHS, him becoming the oldest person to have a number one single in the music charts and ultimately a knighthood and none of these were why he did it. He did it because he wanted to help and do something good. We will not know the full purpose of our lives until we look back on them when we are united with our father in heaven so we must make decisions with the values of Christ in mind and instead of taking the easy way, take the way of faithful obedience. Ruth shows us that we will face challenges in doing so and sometimes it will involve sacrifices – for the care assistants at Bridgedale House it was being separated from their families and for Ruth it was leaving everyone and everything she knew behind – but what Ruth shows us is that we can rest assured that even if we cannot see with our own eyes, God is working in situations and hearts to fulfil His plans and those plans include us. He honours those who, in faith, devote their lives to following his calling and the rewards we receive through the redemption of Christ on the cross outweigh any sacrifice that we may have to make.

### **Note on Kinsman Redeemer**

Deuteronomy 25:5-6 introduces the concept of a Levirate marriage, whereby if an Israelite male died without children then his widow was to marry his brother, or nearest male relative. This relative was known as her Kinsman Redeemer (or in some translations Guardian Redeemer).

If they were to go on to have children, the first born son was to carry the name of the one who had died so that their family line would be continued.

In the story of Ruth, Boaz is a male relative of Ruth's husband but knew that there was another man who was a closer kinsman than he (Ruth 3:12–13) and thus it was his right to marry Ruth. If the nearer kinsman wouldn't fulfil his duty then Boaz, as the next in line could redeem the right. The nearer kinsman decides not to redeem his right because he is worried that, because their firstborn son would not carry his name and hence some of his estate could be inherited by another family line. Boaz then fulfilled the obligation of Kinsman Redeemer by marrying Ruth