

SERMON – 18/1/26
'Home'

Ruth 1:1-22

'Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried.' (Ruth 1:16)

For the next few weeks we are going to read our way through the OT book of Ruth, one of the most touching stories in the Bible. It traces the story of an unremarkable family who, because of famine, become refugees and put down roots in a foreign land but who experience tragedy and ultimately end up returning home. It's a very human story, but it's also part of God's story because this family finds a place in the ancestry of the royal family of the people of God and ultimately of Jesus Christ. Along the way we will consider a number of thought-provoking themes that I think have relevance for each one of us.

The story of Ruth is of a woman of faith and if we are ever tempted to think that having faith in God will exempt us from encountering difficulties in life, then this story will put that firmly to bed, although it will also make clear to us that God is every bit as present in the darkness of hardship as He is in times of joy and success, and it will remind us that God often brings us peace not by removing turmoil from us but by bringing serenity and contentment to us even in the midst of hard times.

Among other things, being human sometimes involves suffering; it involves insecurity; it involves saying goodbye; it involves growing old; it involves bereavement and we are introduced to all of these aspects of human life in this first chapter of the Book of Ruth. But we are also subtly introduced to a theme that will emerge fully as the story unfolds: namely that even through we sometimes go through difficulty times, God is working His purposes out. Naomi's husband, who leads his family away from famine-stricken Israel to make a new life in Moab but who soon dies, is called Elimelech, and his name means 'My God is King'. The message of the book is that God is in charge and the message that I would like to explore with you this morning from

this first chapter is that when we put ourselves in God's hands we will find ourselves 'at home.'

A wee bit of background as we begin. The story takes place during the time of the Judges, soon after the conquest of the Promised Land but before the establishment of the monarchy in Israel, the earthly Kingdom of God. There has been a severe famine and Elimelech takes his wife Naomi and his two sons Mahlon and Kilion, and leaves Bethlehem to find greener pastures in Moab to the east of the River Jordan and the Dead Sea. They make their home there but, as I have said, Elimelech tragically dies, leaving Naomi with two sons to raise. We must assume that the boys are almost fully grown because we are told that they marry local Moabite girls, Orpah and Ruth, and they would together have provided support for Naomi. Some ten years pass and tragedy befalls the family again as both Mahlon and Kilion also die, so with nothing left to live for in Moab and having heard that the land was again providing food for the people in Judah, Naomi decides to go back there. She tells her two daughters-in-law to return to their own families and ultimately one of them does but the other, Ruth, will not let Naomi go alone. In the words of our text this morning Ruth famously says 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. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried.'

On the face of it, and humanly speaking, Ruth is acting foolishly – she is leaving her own security behind, she is going to a place she has never been before, where she knows nobody and where she cannot even be certain of acceptance never mind support. But something (or perhaps we should say Someone) has made her to throw caution to the wind. "Faith, says the writer to the Hebrews, is being certain of what we do not see." Is *that* what convinced Ruth that she must go with Naomi? And if it was, how and why did she, a foreigner, come to believe in the God of Israel?

There is a word that emerged for me as I read and reflected on this chapter during the week. Although I have read the story often and preached on it more than once in the past, this is the first time this word and theme has jumped out at me – the word

is 'home'. Elimelech and his family had been forced to leave their homeland in order to survive. Today we would call them refugees or economic migrants but although we are all too aware of people in our world who fall into that category, I don't think many of us can imagine how hard it would be to *have* to uproot ourselves like that. I wonder if Moab ever felt like home to them. Of course Elimelech died but for Naomi 'home' would be associated with her two sons and then with their wives but that too would have been shaken when her sons also died. Whether it is that which unsettles her or the news that there was food in Judah again we don't know but Naomi decides to return to what she calls 'home'. She prays that her widowed daughters-in-law will each find rest in the 'home' of another husband and she exhorts them to 'Return home.' Orpah does as Naomi suggests but it seems that Ruth has a new sense of what 'going home' must mean for her. She doesn't want to turn her back on Naomi because she has decided that 'home' for her means being with Naomi and with Naomi's people and with Naomi's God. The chapter ends with the two of them arriving in Bethlehem just as the barley harvest was beginning – perhaps that's what made Naomi feel as if she was home again or maybe it was the recognition and welcome she got from the women of the town that she had left so many years before.

Naomi had felt a tug back to Bethlehem. It's not just that this was just the least-worst option. Surely this was God at work in her – it's Ruth who notices that detail even if Naomi herself was not able to see it, and Ruth also begins to feel that divine pull. There is something more to the idea of 'home' we encounter here than just the familiar sights and sounds and smells remembered from of old and it's something that is actually very common amongst human beings. Although often they cannot put their finger on quite what is going on, many people in our world have a sense of rootlessness, a yearning for a better life than is not about wealth or possessions but is about satisfaction and what Jesus would call 'fulness of life'. It was Augustine (himself a seeker after fulfilment) who penned the prayer, 'You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You.'

Is that how you feel, perhaps? Maybe you have moved physically from place to place or maybe you have lived a long time in the one place; maybe you have a yearning to move on and a sense that once you make a move all will be well. But perhaps it is not a physical home you need to find but a spiritual one. Perhaps it is to God Himself that you need to return today.

As we will continue to see as the Book of Ruth unfolds, one of the significant things in the story is the deepening relation between Naomi and Ruth. We may make jokes about the mother-in-law figure and of course there are as many varieties of relationships with mothers-in-law as there are people, but Ruth does not only rely on Naomi as someone who has trodden the path of life (and in particular the path of grief) before her but as someone in whom she sees something to aspire after. The words she says to her are a powerful statement of commitment, a statement of faith in fact. 'Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried.' And off she sets from her own homeland, from her own family, from her own religious roots, not because she needs to find food or safety as a refugee but because she wants to go with Naomi and has chosen to take that road.

I think there is a challenge here to those of us who profess to follow Jesus, that we need to live out our faith in such a way as to attract others to join us, to be people like Naomi whom people like Ruth will aspire to accompany in the way of the Lord. There is a beautiful passage in chapter 8 of the prophecy of Zechariah that speaks of the return of the exiles of Israel to Jerusalem – I'll quote some verses of it now but take a look at the whole chapter later on if you can. It will do your soul good if you have a longing to return to the Lord or to encourage others to come home.

"This is what the LORD says: 'I will return to Zion and dwell in Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the Faithful City, and the mountain of the LORD Almighty will be called the Holy Mountain.' This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Once again men and women of ripe old age will sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each of them with cane in hand because of their age. The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there.'

This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'I will save my people from the countries of the east and the west. I will bring them back to live in Jerusalem; they will be my people, and I will be faithful and righteous to them as their God.'

This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Many peoples and the inhabitants of many cities will yet come, and the inhabitants of one city will go to another and say, "Let us go at once to entreat the LORD and seek the LORD Almighty. I myself am going." And many peoples and powerful nations will come to Jerusalem to seek the LORD Almighty and to entreat him.'

This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'In those days ten people from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, "Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you."'

Could people say that to you and me? 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you'? That's what Ruth said 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. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried.'

Naomi returned home and Ruth discovered for the first time what real home was – 'Elimelech' – my God is King. Have you made that discovery yet? Would you like to? Let your restless heart find rest in God today in Jesus Christ. Come home.