

SERMON Notes

Beyond borders – God loves people

Ruth 1: 1 – 8/ Mark 12: 28 – 34

Migration is a huge political question for most of the world at the moment.

- In the Far East the stateless Rohingya people of Myanmar (formerly Burma), described as one of the most persecuted peoples in the world, are falling victim to people traffickers who put them on rickety boats as they try to flee to Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines.
- In Africa 1.3 million people are still in the refugee camps of South Sudan.
- In the USA, one Republican candidate for the presidential election wants to deport 3 million immigrants and build a wall to stop any more getting over the southern border.
- Meanwhile Europe is struggling to cope with the vast influx of people trying to escape wars in Afghanistan and Syria.

When we hear of tens of thousands and even millions of refugees we struggle to understand the scale of what is happening – and, if we are honest, feel anxious about how this may affect us.

- But in amongst this huge movement of refugees in our world today are stories of individuals and families fleeing for their lives and facing tragedy along the way and sadly this is nothing new.

The Book of Ruth is a story of just one refugee family - and reflecting on their personal story may help inform our own reactions to refugees and lets not forget that some people within our church have first-hand experience of what it is like to be a refugee.

- After all, the book of Ruth was originally written to challenge assumptions and reactions of the Israelite nation to ‘foreigners.’
- Our story begins in Bethlehem with a farming family: Elimelech, his wife Naomi plus their sons Mahlon and Chilion. Their crops had failed and they were facing starvation.
- A commentary on the passage by John Goldingay, says that famines, even in such a normally fertile part of the country, weren’t uncommon: drought or swarms of locusts were usually to blame.
- The family faced a terrible decision – stay and starve, or abandon their home and livelihood and take their chances in the neighbouring country of Moab.
- It was a huge decision as Israelites like them did not get on with the Moabites to say the least.
- The Moabites had even invaded and took over the country for 18 years forcing a change of religion on them forcing them away from the worship of Yhwh.
- There was even part of God’s law about the Moabites: “No Ammonite or Moabite—or any of their descendants, even in the tenth generation—may be included among the Lord’s people.⁴ They refused to provide you with food and water when you were on your way out of Egypt, and they hired Balaam son of Beor, from the city of Pethor in Mesopotamia, to curse you. ⁵ But the Lord your God would not listen to Balaam; instead he turned the curse

into a blessing, because he loved you. ⁶ As long as you are a nation, never do anything to help these nations or to make them prosperous.” (Deut 23: 3 – 6)

- Even though the Moabite language and culture was “very closely related” (*Britanica*) they were the hated enemy of Israelites.

I hope that you see that leaving home and heading for Moab must have been an incredibly hard decision to take.

- Thus Elimelech, his wife Naomi plus their sons Mahlon and Chilion became what would now be described as climate migrants.
- The story moves on, the family settles and Mahlon and Chilion get married to local women Orpah and Ruth.
- But then tragedy strikes as, first, Elimelech dies followed by both of his sons leaving the three women alone and without any means of support – in those days the men earned the money and there was no concept of social security.
- What are they to do? And to make matters worse Naomi feels that God has punished her for moving to Moab.
- Naomi decides to head for home. The farm is still there and the rumours are that conditions have improved, Bethlehem has returned to live up to meaning of its name “House of Bread”.

I think that as a result of all that they have been through together, Naomi, Orpah and Ruth have become very close and they all decide to head across the border – to become refugees once more.

- This is another risky decision: Naomi was facing a rough reception for abandoning her homeland and going to fraternise with the enemy. Orpah and Ruth *were* the enemy, and even worse Moabite women had a very poor reputation backed up by a story to be found in Numbers (25: 1-5) where Moabite women had tempted the men of Israel away from God with their seductive ways!
- Given that leaving their homeland would be so risky, it made perfect sense for Naomi to advise Orpah and Ruth to stay and start over. And reluctantly Orpah agrees, but it was the sensible thing to do.
- Ruth, however, “clings” to Naomi – its an odd phrase, but one that usually describes the relationship between husband and wife – they were very close – and Ruth vows to go with Naomi, to follow her God and to be with her whatever the cost. Incredible devotion!
- The three women in heart of this story really are heroines of our faith.
- Many of you know what happens next – but just in case a reminder helps – Naomi and Ruth arrive back in Bethlehem destitute. Ruth heads off to the fields at the time of the barley harvest and is spotted gleaning food from the margins of the field as is allowed in God’s law.
- The owner of the farm, Boaz, is told about what is going on. He is also made aware that the woman is a Moabite.

What should he do? Should he get rid this Moabite refugee as the writings of Deuteronomy tell him to – or should he continue to adhere to God’s law of caring for

widows and orphans? It must have been a dilemma for him, but he was aware that Ruth was with his relative Naomi.

- Boaz did not get rid of Ruth, instead he helped her.
- Eventually Boaz ends up purchasing Elimelech's farm and is married to Ruth – after all the tragedy there is a happy ending.
- The interesting 'PS' to Ruth's story is that the son she and Boaz had was Obed. And Obed was the grandfather of the great Israelite King, David – whose distant relative, several generations later via Joseph, was Jesus.
- And that is one of the points of the story of Ruth – the Saviour of the world is related to a refugee!

Clearly the story of Ruth is specific to her time and place – we should not, and could not translate her experience to the vast problems that the world faces today – for there is no easy fix to any of what is going on – and we have minimal impact or say in international politics.

- What we can be responsible for, however, are our own thoughts and reactions and they should be influenced by our faith.
- The bottom line is that migration is about individuals and not faceless numbers. What can be done on a one-to-one basis?

Here are a few pointers for further reflection:

- Look at the risks Naomi and Ruth took in becoming refugees – they did not make their decisions lightly – they felt they *had* to do what they did.
- Look at the reaction of Boaz to finding Ruth in his fields scrounging food – he *chose* to be compassionate because he was following God's compassion for those with no other means of support.
- Finally – think about the consequences of Ruth taking up residency in Bethlehem – many generations later it was the birth place of Jesus – refugees can *enhance* society.
- Let us remember too that here in Britain our genetic heritage comes from wave upon wave of migration and invasion there may not be such a thing as a pure bred Brit.
- We are who we are only because of our genetic and cultural diversity which makes us British.

I'd like to leave one last thought with you: when the earth is seen from space there are no national borders visible – other than the Great Wall of China which doesn't function like that anymore. From God's perspective there are no borders.

- People make borders, people draw lines on maps, build walls, erect fences topped with razor wire and protect them with guns.
- I wonder what God thinks?

So who is our neighbour?

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