

The general council reflects with Ruth and Mary

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Why Ruth?

Ruth's story is one of struggle, dignity, self-giving and transformation. Her story and her predicament can readily be recognized by many women and many of the world's poor. And we will read it as a story, as a text.¹

This is in one sense an ordinary story, a story without miracles – other than the miracle of change. We engage with a hope that is conferred by Ruth's struggle rather than Ruth's sanctity.

"It's all very well for Jesus," we may be inclined to say. "He is the Son of God, how really can we act like him?" But Ruth is an ordinary woman, in a line of many ordinary women whose self-emptying brings closer the fullness of life God intends.

Fullness of life in Ruth is not simply prosperity out of poverty, but partnership with God in bringing his dreams closer to fruition. Fullness of life is involvement in God's transforming mission.

Why Mary?

Mary's *magnificat* (Lk 1.46-55) sums up how God is moving towards life in all its fullness by raising up the lowly and humbling the mighty. It is a hopeful and defiant expression of God's mission in the world.

Mary's *magnificat* interacts with Ruth's life in interesting ways. Each declares the favour God has for the marginalized and how God looks to them to become agents of redemption. These stories do not bolster the view that women and foreigners have a subservient place in God's mission. Far from it, they are to the fore. We hope that holding together these two women and these two parts of the biblical canon will be an antidote to a sexist reading of their stories.

How will the stories be used?

The book of Ruth will be read as an unfolding narrative throughout the general council. This continuous reading does not coincide with our daily worship themes, but each of these themes emerges through reflection on the Ruth story and the *magnificat*. The council will find ways to present the whole story and bring the presence of Ruth and Mary alive amongst us.

Ruth like Mary chose to become part of the life, faith and mission of God's people. Yet there would have been no room for them if they had not created it. Their struggle for life is also a struggle for inclusion. For women like Ruth and Mary are not always welcome in the text, let alone amongst the people of the text.

For us as readers, their different experiences create a forum, opening up many of the issues we still struggle with. How do we invite others to life in all its fullness? Who is included in the invitation, and who is left out?

Note

1. Many scholars date Ruth after the exile in Babylon; others place it earlier, in the period of the monarchy. The Hebrew scriptures include Ruth among the writings; the Christian canon, however, follows the Septuagint in placing it after Judges.

Day 1

Worship theme: Creation

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. 2 The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. 3 But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. 4 These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, 5 both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.
– Ruth 1.1-5

In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.
– Judges 21.25

No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord...
– Deuteronomy 23.3

Commentary

Even though Ruth is written much later, this story as set in its canonical position is read against the backdrop of the end of Judges. Everyone did what was right in their own eyes.

Ruth's story begins with famine: even in Bethlehem, the house of bread, there is famine. The famine forces Elimelech, Naomi and their sons to become refugees, economic migrants. They leave for a new life, in Moab of all places. Moab is fiercely denounced in the prophetic texts for the practice of child sacrifice (see Is 15, Jer 48, Amos 2). Sacrifice is, in fact, what follows later, for Ruth's life once she returns to Judah with Naomi is a story of self-sacrifice.

Tragedy continues to befall these refugees to Moab, even though they settle and the sons marry. The family falls apart with the premature deaths of each of the three men. Thus we sit with three widows and wonder how they will decide what is the right thing to do. They have famine on the one side and hostile neighbours on the other.

Why does the text seem so matter of fact about this? Why no wailing over this misfortune? Has everything run dry, even the tongues of Naomi, Orpah and Ruth? Where is the cursing and questioning that surely must accompany these tragedies? These women are strangely silenced in the text.

Maybe the text is not yet sure if the reader is ready to get alongside these women whose choices (in Naomi's case) and race (in Ruth and Orpah's case) are not naturally going to find sympathy from its original Hebrew or Jewish audience.

Yet the text is establishing the test case for God's people and God's kingdom, how the widow is treated. From the outset the reader is set this test, what are our reactions to these vulnerable widows?

Against the backdrop of our current environmental concern we may connect the context of famine in Ruth with the final verse of Judges. This verse describes the selfish urge to master our own destiny at the expense of others, an urge that threatens and distorts our environment and economy. Our own experiences, in a world where famine is for many a daily reality, tell us that these briefly described tragedies accompany the destruction of God's creation still. We have our own stories to tell of famine, poverty, migration, social disintegration and family disintegration, and indeed of people silenced in the text of our world.

Our two strong women, Ruth and Mary, choose creation and they choose cooperation.

We are about to see that Ruth will not observe the geopolitical boundaries that carve up creation. Nor will she accept the racial stereotypes that subvert the interdependence and beauty of creation. She chooses to settle in the territory of her mother-in-law despite its hostility to Moabites.

And Mary, of course, chooses to bear the Immanuel, who is the hope for a renewed creation and the flowering of Ruth's choice to cooperate with the mission of God. Jesus is, as Matthew reveals, one of Ruth's descendants.

Questions

1. According to Judges 21.25, in the days of Naomi and Elimelech "people did what was right in their own eyes". Are we treating creation with the same attitude today? How does our care of the whole creation reflect God's covenant blessing and promise for life on earth?
2. Famine and other "plagues" can result from natural causes as well as human misuse and neglect of the environment. What change of life and heart does famine challenge us to seek? How does the presence of drought, floods,

famine and hunger in our world inform our care for the environment as well as one another?

3. God calls us to be partners in caring for the earth. In Luke 1.26-34 Mary, like Ruth, is invited to choose against her own interests to cooperate with God. For both women this means breaking with their local and parochial worldviews. Can you choose against the interests and values of your “home” culture? Can you choose against the interests and values of your “home” theology?
4. As stewards of the whole creation, how do we balance the needs of the environment on the one hand with the needs of society on the other, especially where they are in conflict?

Day 2

Worship theme: Gender justice

Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had considered his people and given them food. 7 So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. 8 But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go back each of you to your mother’s house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. 9 The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.” Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. 10 They said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.” 11 But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? 12 Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, 13 would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me.” 14 Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. 15 So she said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” 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!” 18 When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

– Ruth 1.6-18

Commentary

As we follow the unfolding choices of these three women, we begin to detect the personal costs and predicaments they face.

The silence of the women continues as Naomi decides she is going back to Bethlehem. It is not clear whether Ruth and Orpah share in the decision or just follow their mother-in-law, debating with themselves what they each should do for the best. Whatever their anxieties or fears, these remain unvoiced.

What are Ruth and Orpah thinking about? Might they be wrestling with the risk they are taking, as Moabite women going into Judah? How will they be received by the men of Judah? How will they be received by the women of Judah? How will they be received by the rest of Naomi's family? Whose family do they do the best for?

What is Naomi wrestling with on their silent march out of Moab? "Why did I follow my husband?" The men of Israel's early history had a habit of trekking off, dragging family in tow. Is Naomi cross with her dead husband and sons? Does she also wonder what reception she will receive in Judah?

Naomi encourages her two daughters-in-law to return home to Moab and the security they will find there. Orpah takes that road to security, but Ruth refuses it. Instead she takes the road to uncertainty in Judah with a silent mother-in-law at her side.

Naomi knows the reception that is waiting for a Moabite woman. And, probably, so does Ruth. But Ruth lays aside her family, her history and her culture to identify with her mother-in-law's people. She lays aside her own identity to identify with a people whose theology makes little room for her, a foreign woman. Deuteronomy 23.3 forbade the entry of a Moabite into the assembly of the Lord, and (ominously for little Obed) even the children of mixed marriages were forbidden.

Like Mary, another wanderer to Bethlehem, Ruth responds to an uncertain future with little more than a willingness to try to participate in the promise and change they have discerned in a God who breaks out of Israel. So Ruth and Naomi return to Bethlehem, the house of bread. It is blessed with a full harvest, but will it live up to its name when these women count for so little?

Questions

1. Seeking community and solidarity, Ruth adopts Naomi's people as her people and she adopts Naomi's God as her God. But it is clear from her action that Ruth is not content with a meek and submissive "place" amongst these people. What is our sense of the "place" of women and men in the mission of God? What about their "place" in the community of the church?
2. Naomi, Ruth and Orpah are faced with the dilemma of choosing to do what is best for their family. Is this a familiar dilemma faced by women? Is the same dilemma faced by men?

3. Do we stereotype these women as wanting solidarity with family or do we see the strength needed in their difficult choices? Should they have chosen a more individualist path?
4. Look at Luke 1.35-38. The lives of Ruth and Mary tell us that God is able to see beyond the “lowliness” of race or gender. How well do we see beyond race and gender?

Day 3

Worship theme: Economic justice

So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them; and the women said, “Is this Naomi?” **20** *She said to them, “Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me.* **21** *I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty; why call me Naomi when the Lord has dealt harshly with me, and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?”* **22** *So Naomi returned together with Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, who came back with her from the country of Moab. They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.*
– Ruth 1.19-22

Commentary

Ruth and Naomi arrive in Bethlehem where they become the talk of the town. The neighbours ask, “Is this Naomi?” Is there a mix of shock and pleasure in seeing Naomi so reduced? (Ruth at this stage is beyond public mention, though no doubt, in private, people are talking about her. As we see in chapter 2, Ruth is known.)

Naomi’s deepening depression and her sense of humiliation build to such an extent that she denies her name, her faith, her hope. It’s a moment of pathos and irony.

Forced by hunger and the need for work, Naomi’s husband took the family into Moab and Naomi gave her all to make it work. Nevertheless, Naomi wandered at a time when her neighbours all stayed home. Now she returns with nothing, ready to be the target of village gossip. So Naomi stands vulnerable, hungry and humiliated, and summons enough Job-like scorn and spirit to curse her situation bitterly.

What Naomi and Ruth face is the struggle of all economic migrants: will we find shelter, will we find food, will our gifts be recognized, will our work be blessed, will we have to compete with everyone? No wonder Naomi is afraid and bitter.

But Naomi's attribution of calamity to God stands awkwardly and ironically with Ruth's preceding confession of faith in Naomi's God (Ruth 1.16-17). We have just witnessed the remarkable confession of a foreigner in a God who supposedly hates Moabites. Now we witness the bitter renunciation by one of the chosen of that same God who supposedly loves Israel alone.

Perhaps Naomi's outpouring of grief is also a way to throw herself on her neighbours' mercy, or at least on their pity. Sadly, Naomi's bitterness swamps everything, even Ruth. Naomi is over-dramatizing. Even if she went away full, she has not come back empty – for by her side is Ruth, her loving Moabite daughter-in-law. Is Naomi now ashamed of Ruth as well?

The story plays with the irony of the “full” that is empty (Israel/Naomi) and the “empty” that is full (Moab/Ruth). Naomi's risk-taking does not seem to have borne fruit. Now we are entering the story of Ruth's risk-taking. Will it bear fruit?

Naomi's bitter words tell us she feels cheated. Is God really dead set against the life story of Naomi and Ruth, or does their story actually tell us something about the story of God? Ironically Naomi points us to the risk God takes, the choices God makes: to be emptied for others.

This is also the story of Mary. She too is a paradigm for God's life, she bears life for others, she labours to the point of emptiness for life in all its fullness, and she witnesses to liberation through the emptying of the rich and the filling of the poor.

The risk of these fine-sounding words is evident, for the economic consequences of this predicament fall on Ruth. She is the one who must look for work while her mother-in-law mopes at home. Ruth shoulders the risks and responsibilities of the migrant worker with no rights. It may be a full harvest in Bethlehem, but will she be allowed even a small share?

Questions

1. What are the experiences of migrant workers in our societies? Would migrant workers in our societies face better conditions than Ruth, gleaning the barley after the landowner has had his fill?
2. Is Naomi over-dramatizing? Does Naomi need pastoral care to get over it, or does she need to be encouraged to change her theology? Are we promoting theologies that are so self-centred they neither reflect the life and choices of God or of the poor?
3. Is to go away full and to come back empty really a curse? In seeking fullness, are we blessed? Is this not the neoliberal capitalist spirit? Are we invited to a life of self-emptying – to only ever seek fullness for another's sake?
4. Look at Luke 1.39-45. What steps do we need to take in economics and in employment to ensure the blessings of our womb and work, the blessing of all our creativity and productivity?

Day 4

Worship theme: Inclusiveness and participation

Now Naomi had a kinsman on her husband's side, a prominent rich man, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. 2 And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain, behind someone in whose sight I may find favour." She said to her, "Go, my daughter." 3 So she went. She came and gleaned in the field behind the reapers. As it happened, she came to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech.

4 Just then Boaz came from Bethlehem. He said to the reapers, "The Lord be with you." They answered, "The Lord bless you." 5 Then Boaz said to his servant who was in charge of the reapers, "To whom does this young woman belong?" 6 The servant who was in charge of the reapers answered, "She is the Moabite who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab. 7 She said, "Please, let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the reapers.' So she came, and she has been on her feet from early this morning until now, without resting even for a moment." 8 Then Boaz said to Ruth, "Now listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women. 9 Keep your eyes on the field that is being reaped, and follow behind them. I have ordered the young men not to bother you. If you get thirsty, go to the vessels and drink from what the young men have drawn." 10 Then she fell prostrate, with her face to the ground, and said to him, "Why have I found favour in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?" 11 But Boaz answered her, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. 12 May the Lord reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!" 13 Then she said, "May I continue to find favour in your sight, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant, even though I am not one of your servants." 14 At mealtime Boaz said to her, "Come here, and eat some of this bread, and dip your morsel in the sour wine." So she sat beside the reapers, and he heaped up for her some parched grain. She ate until she was satisfied, and she had some left over. 15 When she got up to glean, Boaz instructed his young men, "Let her glean even among the standing sheaves, and do not reproach her. 16 You must also pull out some handfuls for her from the bundles, and leave them for her to glean, and do not rebuke her."

17 So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley. 18 She picked it up and came into

the town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gleaned. Then she took out and gave her what was left over after she herself had been satisfied. 19 Her mother-in-law said to her, "Where did you glean today? And where have you worked? Blessed be the man who took notice of you." So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked, and said, "The name of the man with whom I worked today is Boaz." 20 Then Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "Blessed be he by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!" Naomi also said to her, "The man is a relative of ours, one of our nearest kin." 21 Then Ruth the Moabite said, "He even said to me, 'Stay close by my servants, until they have finished all my harvest.'" 22 Naomi said to Ruth, her daughter-in-law, "It is better, my daughter, that you go out with his young women, otherwise you might be bothered in another field." 23 So she stayed close to the young women of Boaz, gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests; and she lived with her mother-in-law." – Ruth 2.1-23

Commentary

The narrator tells us something Ruth doesn't know, so here even we have power over Ruth. As readers, we enter into the power relationship that makes Ruth so vulnerable. Ruth does not know how Bethlehem society works. She is not aware of who the main players are. We are told, however, and we are invited to see Ruth as still the outsider, oblivious to the clues and signs around her. All unknowingly, she goes straight to the one who has an obligation to include Ruth and Naomi in his family life.

Does the narrator tell us about Boaz's relationship to Naomi to hint at a happy ending? Perhaps the narrator is dispelling the tension, telling us there is hope. This rich and prominent man could be the answer to Naomi's prayer and restore her faith in the God of Israel. But maybe the narrator tells us about Boaz to raise the tension. Here is someone who has a duty towards Naomi and Ruth, but will he do his duty? How will he conduct himself if he meets Ruth? A question mark hangs over Boaz.

Ruth works all day without a rest, because the best way to avoid trouble is to get on with your work and not to look anyone in the eye. But they notice her and they know her story. There is a great deal of tension in this chapter, the shadow of sexual violence falls here. (The book of Judges is full of violence against women.) Lots of gentle, civil words are said, but Ruth knows she must show great gratitude. She prostrates herself and humiliates herself at the feet of Boaz, this stranger who still hasn't told her who he really is.

Ironically, Boaz is right. Ruth is seeking refuge under the wing of the God of Israel, because she has found little refuge from the people of Israel, even from her own family. And she should be grateful?

What is Boaz waiting for? What's the problem? Either claim her as a wife or take her as a woman: after all, he's a rich and prominent man!

Boaz goes out of his way to make things a *little* more comfortable for Ruth. He directs his men to treat her respectfully, even charitably. At Boaz's insistence they will overlook the presence of this foreigner. But Boaz still overlooks his relationship to this foreigner.

Perhaps Boaz is going through a gradual conversion. Leviticus makes clear that this is how Boaz should treat the refugee. Leviticus' teaching about treatment of the foreigner at harvest comes from an ethic based on the holiness of Yahweh and the history of Israel. Theology and history are meant to conspire to create justice, not security. Boaz is beginning to discover this. But he still cannot quite accept his family obligations. Ruth, by contrast, puts him to shame. She takes to Naomi not only her gleaned barley, but also the leftovers from her lunch. All this she gives to Naomi.

On Ruth's return, Naomi comes back to life and remembers that Boaz is a relative. Only now that the danger has passed does she think to warn Ruth about the risks to women in the field.

So the author continues to play with both readers and characters. Boaz knows Ruth belongs to him, but does not know that Ruth also knows this now. And of course Boaz doesn't know that Ruth knows he knows. No one will admit this knowledge yet. No one will make plain who belongs and who is included.

Questions

1. Why doesn't Boaz honour his family connection? Is his kindness enough? Should he account for his behaviour?
2. Boaz goes out of his way to make things a little easier for Ruth. Is this what the North does for the South? Do Christians and churches in the North and the South really belong to each other? Do we feel like and act like a family? What issues of inclusion and participation lie between us?
3. Ruth makes herself vulnerable and has to flatter powerful men. Is this the way we should face inequality?
4. Look at Luke 1.46-48. Ruth and Mary show God acting on unexpected values using unexpected people. What is it that Ruth and Mary offered to God that Boaz and Joseph couldn't give? How might we practise this inclusiveness as churches?

Day 5

Worship theme: Peace

Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you. 2 Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with

whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. 3 Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. 4 When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do.” 5 She said to her, “All that you tell me I will do.”

6 So she went down to the threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had instructed her. 7 When Boaz had eaten and drunk, and he was in a contented mood, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came stealthily and uncovered his feet, and lay down. 8 At midnight the man was startled, and turned over, and there, lying at his feet, was a woman! 9 He said, “Who are you?” And she answered, “I am Ruth, your servant; spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin.” 10 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. 12 But now, though it is true that I am a near kinsman, there is another kinsman more closely related than I. 13 Remain this night, and in the morning, if he will act as next-of-kin for you, good; let him do it. If he is not willing to act as next-of-kin for you, then, as the Lord lives, I will act as next-of-kin for you. Lie down until the morning.”

– Ruth 3.1-13

Commentary

Naomi suggests that sleeping with Boaz is for Ruth’s own good. “This will bring you security,” she tells Ruth. Naomi sends her out like a prostitute, knowing that if there is any security to come from it Naomi will also share in it. And, of course, if it all goes wrong... well, Naomi is spared those consequences.

Of all the characters in the story, Naomi is the one who causes most concern. Boaz has at least the time-honoured excuse that he is only a man. Naomi places Ruth at the sharp end of that argument, for Naomi tells Ruth to get into bed with Boaz. Even then Naomi gives no wisdom, no advice other than “just do what he says”. What mother would tell her daughter that?

What do we imagine is going on in Ruth’s mind as she heads for the threshing floor, what are the questions and fears welling up inside her? “Why didn’t you tell me about Boaz before?” Do we imagine her walking serenely into this group of drunken men?

So Ruth goes and startles Boaz in his bed. What is he to think? What are we to think? “So all that they say about Moabite women is true! That is all they are interested in.” Isn’t this the case for Mary too? Is this the attitude of her neighbours when they find out she’s pregnant?

For Boaz, this is the moment of truth. How will he respond to Ruth who offers her body to him? What sort of a man will he prove to be?

Ruth may be ready to lay everything down for her mother-in-law, but she is not a fool. She is brave enough to point out to Boaz what Boaz has yet to admit to himself. “Spread your cloak over your servant, *for you are next of kin.*” In other words, “I’ve come for protection, *not* sex, because, Boaz, we are family.”

Now Boaz begins to accept his conversion. He feels his love rise for this worthy foreign woman. He begins to take responsibility.

The fortunes of the story are beginning to shift in favour of Ruth. Her commitment, dignity and courage are beginning to reshape the state of affairs, not just for Ruth, but for Naomi and for Boaz. They are beginning to recognize the blessing they receive from a Moabite woman. They are beginning to glimpse the vision God has for his world, a dream of a future peace that includes Moab as well as Israel.

Questions

1. Is Ruth to be condemned for turning to the persuasiveness of sex? What about Naomi? What about Boaz for that matter? What does peace look like in these desperate circumstances?
2. “Is this all you think we are good for?” – Why do the poor get blamed as well as taken advantage of?
3. Read Luke 1.49. Ruth was forced to consider sex as the only tactic left to get the powerful Boaz to act. Ruth and Mary tell us God wants to turn things upside down. How does God provoke us to look for and live according to a vision of peace?

Day 6

Worship theme: Healing

So she lay at his feet until morning, but got up before one person could recognize another; for he said, “It must not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor.” 15 Then he said, “Bring the cloak you are wearing and hold it out.” So she held it, and he measured out six measures of barley, and put it on her back; then he went into the city. 16 She came to her mother-in-law, who said, “How did things go with you, my daughter?” Then she told her all that the man had done for her, 17 saying, “He gave me these six measures of barley, for he said, “Do not go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.” 18 She replied, “Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man will not rest, but will settle the matter today.”

– Ruth 3.14-18

Commentary

Ruth precipitates a crisis, but the resolution of the crisis is taken out of her hands. Now, the men must act, and Ruth is made to wait. Wheeling and dealing must take place and this is something Ruth is excluded from. It is of course Boaz's opportunity to give something back to Ruth. Ruth is not to go back empty-handed. So Ruth leaves with 20 kilos of barley over her shoulder. And Boaz leaves to act the hero, to free his (belatedly acknowledged) family from their poverty.

It is a curious moment. Imagine Ruth in her best clothes, with the faint aroma of perfume on her still, her hair messy from sleep and the slight air of panic that the other men might wake. On top of all this, Boaz takes off her cloak and fills it with barley. Slightly staggering and lightly dusted in barley husks, Ruth stumbles home. Do Naomi and Boaz think she is really to be treated as some kind of mule? This is Ruth's symbolic experience of being sent empty and coming back filled.

Ruth accepts all this indignity. Not that she does so meekly, or that she endorses the image of the obedient and subservient daughter. On the contrary, she shows her strength, her initiative and her dignity.

In the foreigner Ruth, we see the epitome of God's self-giving spirit of reconciliation and healing. In many respects, neither Naomi nor Boaz are worthy of her, yet Ruth gives fully and freely to them. Naomi begins now to lift out of her depression. Her past and predicament begin to weigh less heavily. Yet Ruth, who shares the same past and predicament, has sat throughout at peace with her loss and her neighbours. She has endured with dignity, and with and through her others have been restored.

The "Amen" uttered by Ruth, in body and soul, frees the mission of God to grow. Thus it is also with Mary, who gives her body and soul as part of the outpouring of mercy and healing on a new generation of God's world and people. These two can say and sing of God's healing way, that by their bruises others are healed.

Questions

1. Do you think Ruth felt insulted by being given the barley? Might it have seemed like payment? In the text Ruth shows incredible grace. Where have you met this graciousness in people? What other aspects of Ruth and the people like her do you admire?
2. How are healing and restoration bound together? Are there examples of this we can reflect on together?
3. Look at Luke 1.51-52. Mary's *magnificat* goes to the heart of the injustices of her day and ours. Do these verses offer us images of healing – humbling the mighty, lifting up the lowly – or will that just make matters worse? How does Ruth humble the mighty and lift up the lowly?

Day 7

Worship theme: Honouring diversity

No sooner had Boaz gone up to the gate and sat down there than the next-of-kin, of whom Boaz had spoken, came passing by. So Boaz said, "Come over, friend; sit down here." And he went over and sat down. 2 Then Boaz took ten men of the elders of the city, and said, "Sit down here"; so they sat down. 3 He then said to the next-of-kin, "Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, is selling the parcel of land that belonged to our kinsman Elimelech. 4 So I thought I would tell you of it, and say: Buy it in the presence of those sitting here, and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, redeem it; but if you will not, tell me, so that I may know; for there is no one prior to you to redeem it, and I come after you." So he said, "I will redeem it." 5 Then Boaz said, "The day you acquire the field from the hand of Naomi, you are also acquiring Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead man, to maintain the dead man's name on his inheritance." 6 At this, the next-of-kin said, "I cannot redeem it for myself without damaging my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it." 7 Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging: to confirm a transaction, the one took off a sandal and gave it to the other; this was the manner of attesting in Israel. 8 So when the next-of-kin said to Boaz, "Acquire it for yourself," he took off his sandal.

9 Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, "Today you are witnesses that I have acquired from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and Mahlon. 10 I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite, the wife of Mahlon, to be my wife, to maintain the dead man's name on his inheritance, in order that the name of the dead may not be cut off from his kindred and from the gate of his native place; today you are witnesses." 11 Then all the people who were at the gate, along with the elders, said, "We are witnesses. May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you produce children in Ephrathah and bestow a name in Bethlehem; 12 and, through the children that the Lord will give you by this young woman, may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah."

– Ruth 4.1-12

Commentary

In the first three chapters, Ruth is the key figure. It's her story, shaped by her action, courage and struggle. Yet from here on she almost disappears from the narrative. In whose interest, one wonders, does this subsequent action take place?

The negotiation for Ruth's freedom is intriguing not just for the sense of custom, but for the technique. Boaz is true to his word and goes straight to resolve and redeem the situation. He shows that men, like women, can be wise and wily. He needs to be, of course, because the land is very desirable. It is the dependants who are not. As today, it is land that is valued, not people. If he were part of a transnational corporation today, he might just buy the land and evict Naomi and Ruth.

Who or what is being redeemed? Is it the land? Or is it Naomi and Ruth? The writer is playing with us again.

But the crowd tells us what is happening. This act is not simply the climax of a romantic story, it is the reassertion of salvation history. The crowd knows who is being redeemed. (Obviously Ruth's story is something of a local *cause célèbre*.) They know this is about Ruth and all that she has made possible. The crowd puts her in the company of Rachel, Leah and Tamar, and raise up their own *magnificat*. Redemption today has come from Moab! Ruth's inclusion means that Israel renews itself as the people of God. Imagine if this last chapter were read at the same time as Ezra's denunciation of foreign wives!

Questions

1. Ruth's neighbours are moved at last to a genuine warmth and welcome towards her. They have begun to recognize this foreign woman in their midst. She is not just a nice stranger. She is a sacred stranger and now they belong to each other. Do we have the experience of "strangers" coming to belong to new communities, without having to lose their identities?
2. So, who has redeemed whom in this passage? Can the poor redeem the rich? Do the rich redeem the poor? Can we be redeemed without honouring diversity? Are we damned by our desire to stay separate and pure?
3. Read Luke 1.53. In the light of the *magnificat*, "honouring diversity" cannot be a strategy by which we leave each other alone – you in your small corner and I in mine. It cannot be a game in which we leave unsettled the divisions between us. Is that how it seems at times? How do we face such divisions and diversities? Can we honour diversities if they are unjust?

Day 8

Worship theme: Mission

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, 48 for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; 49 for the Mighty One

has done great things for me, and holy is his name. 50 His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. 51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. 52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; 53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. 54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, 55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever. ’

– Luke 1.46-55

Commentary

Our choices reveal our values and our beliefs.

Mary receives the news that God has chosen her. The angel tells her that the mighty God has humbled himself to lift up this lowly peasant girl, because this is the fullness of life, the fullness of hope, the fullness of justice that God dreams of for creation.

Mary chooses to say yes to this, to include her life in this new covenant for creation. So Mary rejoices with God and she rejoices that she is included in the movement of God into the world.

Mary’s wisdom is handed on to her through the story of women like Ruth. Mary sings out afresh God’s ancient commitment to liberation and transformation. Mary rejoices because God is happy to come to the margins, because God entwines his hopes and heart with those at the margins. The mission of God comes to the palace of kings and emperors from the humble homes of women like Mary.

God’s mission is still rooted in a dream shared one night with a young peasant girl. A dream of the hungry filled, the proud humbled, the rich sent away empty-handed, the lowly raising their eyes and knees from the gutter. Life for all in fullness finds its voice and vision in her *magnificat*.

The church has often stifled this song. But whenever God is appropriated by the cruel or indifferent and used to baptize poverty and injustice, Mary’s *magnificat* remains defiant – just as Ruth’s story remains defiant whenever God’s people give in to our sectarian egos.

This defiance is rooted in hope. For Mary’s *magnificat* assures us that grace is moving in history, and offering both us and God the room to improvise when things turn against us. We see this improvising grace in God’s choice of partners. These choices often subvert and perplex the already chosen, but they give new life to God’s mission. Think of Paul among the Gentiles!

We see this grace in those who face poverty with courage and dignity. This is grace to sustain us in the persistent struggle for life in all its fullness.

We realize with Ruth and Mary that grace renews all our lives, once we have confessed our self-centred and sectarian sin. But grace is not cheap. It is costly to Mary, and costly to Ruth. In the measure that we respond faithfully, it

is costly to us too. This is rooted in God's strange sense of economy: we are filled, in order to be emptied for the life of others.

Questions

1. Defiance and grace characterize Mary and Ruth. Do defiance and grace characterize us and our relationships with the struggles of our world and our neighbours?
2. How does the *magnificat* subvert and sustain us in our sense of mission as churches? The *magnificat* is at work in Ruth's story as it is with Mary. Has it been at work in our midst? Or is that too much to hope for?
3. Look at Luke 1.54-55. God's memory seems to free God to act hopefully and mercifully. It ensures that God feels connected, that God acts out of a sense of belonging to our world and God lives among us. What about memory in our churches? Does it affirm or alienate? What does it enable or prevent in our churches?

Day 9

Worship theme: Covenant

So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the Lord made her conceive, and she bore a son. 14 Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! 15 He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him." 16 Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. 17 The women of the neighbourhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David. 18 Now these are the descendants of Perez: Perez became the father of Hezron, 19 Hezron of Ram, Ram of Amminadab, 20 Amminadab of Nahshon, Nahshon of Salmon, 21 Salmon of Boaz, Boaz of Obed, 22 Obed of Jesse, and Jesse of David. – Ruth 4.13-22

Commentary

The story of Ruth opens with barrenness, brokenness and despair, but comes to a close with healing, wholeness and hope. This transformation arises through Ruth's resistance and struggle. She is the ground and seed of hope.

Yet our story-teller immediately retires this strong, self-giving woman behind her new husband and mother-in-law. Naomi is healed of her bitter depression and is invited back to prominence by her clucking neighbours. She is *Mara* no

more. Boaz gets his woman, and his way with her. Even God gets something in this story, in fact the most important thing: God gets the next link in the chain of transformation and messianic future. A Moabite woman bears the ancestor of David and thus of Jesus too, for God has the good sense to give Ruth a son. The traditional values of a traditional culture are reasserted.

Why does our writer silence Ruth at the end? Why do we not hear Ruth's voice, or even her name spoken? Are we to say, "All is well. Ruth has done her job and can now retire to her proper submissive place"? Is a reasserted Zion – an unredeemed nationalist and patriarchal tradition – really the point of Ruth's story?

Perhaps not. The wedding between Boaz and Ruth hints at a new covenant. A new covenant to bind these former strangers, to make them friends and partners. A covenant that has room for Judah and Moab, just as it has room for Ruth and Mary. And anyway, do we really think that Ruth *remained* invisible, retiring and submissive, as her new life with Boaz and Naomi took shape?

Or perhaps the absence of Ruth is a way of recognizing how our prejudice almost automatically reasserts itself. Ruth is now part of Israel, so she can become invisible. Attitudes towards Moab, attitudes towards foreigners, can remain unchecked now that Ruth is "one of us" – an honorary Jew.

Or is this the final test the author sets before the reader? Is this the task we must take away? The story remains with its troubling wisdom and its power to subvert and inspire us. Women are not objects. The poorest are the strongest. The people we want to reject are the most valuable of all. As we move with Ruth and Mary into God's future, our covenantal family must voice the freedom of *magnificat* – not the narrowness of prejudice.

Questions

1. Does Naomi's flawed theology of God existing to fill us with good things come true at the end? Is her theology vindicated? In the end, Ruth is excluded from the text. Do we treat God the same way, once we have what we want? Are we going away filled with good things?
2. What aspects of the Ruth story do you see subverting the values in your own church, in your society and in our fellowship of churches?
3. Ruth's story ends with a wedding, a covenant of faithful love between Ruth and Boaz. How have we further awakened our sense of mutual commitment to each other and to Christ's vision of life in all its fullness? How can we bring this experience back to our congregations and our churches?