

Sunday 4th November, 2018
The Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost - Year B

Ruth 1:1-18
Psalm 146
Hebrews 9:11-15
Mark 12:13-17,28-34

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

“But Ruth said to Naomi, “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. Where you die, I will die – there will I be buried.” (Ruth 1:16-17)

Friends of mine chose this passage from Ruth as one of the readings at their wedding. And you can see why, I’m sure. It’s a beautiful passage, expressing deep human emotions of fidelity and love. It’s part of a wider narrative with which, if you are not familiar, I encourage you to go home and read. It is not a long book - just four chapters, but it is rich in many ways.

What we hear expressed this morning is, on the face of it, a declaration by Ruth to Naomi of her love and care and faithfulness to a *human* relationship - a daughter-in-law standing by her mother-in-law, proclaiming that she would rather stay with her, leave her own family home and the country in which she grew up, and go back with Naomi to Bethlehem.

Given that Ruth’s husband, Naomi’s son, is now dead, there is no compulsion for her to do this. Indeed, as a widow she ought to have stayed in Moab and resided with her family of birth - that would have been the safest option. But safe doesn’t seem to count for much in Ruth’s assessment of the situation. Love wins out over safe. And so they return, together, to Bethlehem.

That is the human part of the story, and it is rich and profound.

But as with everything we consider, there is also another component of the story - where is God in this? Well, of course, God is there in the human aspect - the love which God gives, as gift to us, is clearly evident in the human relationship, the bond which has formed between Ruth and Naomi. But let's go a little further.

Ruth is a Moabite - which means that she and her people worshipped probably a multitude of gods - the chief among them, we believe, was Chemosh, a god of war. If it had not been for the severe famine in their own country, Elimelech and Naomi would never have chosen to live in Moab - never chosen to have taken Moabite wives for their sons.

Now, Naomi is returning home to her own country - a widow herself, of advancing years she will doubtless be reliant on the goodwill and generosity of her family there. But she is returning home to the sanctuary of family life... and Temple life, with all that this entails. Ruth has no knowledge of such a life; no sense of what it means to worship God in the Temple, and of the strict rules that govern life as a Jew. And so, in her faithfulness to Naomi, she is also expressing a faithfulness to God. "your people shall be my people, and your God my God"

What is it that Ruth sees in Naomi? We can't be sure, of course. But presumably she sees a woman who, despite the incredible sadness that she has endured in losing not only her husband, but then both her sons in a short period of time, remains faithful to God. To be sure, Naomi is sad, perhaps even angry at God (later, she asks that she be known as Mara, which means "God has turned his back") but she still commends her daughters-in-law to God's loving care, as she makes the decision to return to God's land and God's people.

Yes, there is a faithfulness and a dedication to God which clearly evokes something within Ruth. In Naomi's God... in Yahweh, she sees something that her own gods cannot offer. In the relationship that she has with Naomi she sees something of God's character of love echoed and reflected in this - and she yearns to know more. "your people shall be my people, and your God my God"

Ruth is giving up all sense of surety and her own family ties in going with Naomi. These were doubtless the very considerations that led Naomi's other daughter-in-law, Orpah, to return to her own family, feeling most strongly that safety and security that she knew she could rely upon, as she would be welcomed back into her parents' home. But Ruth senses something else - an urge that is too strong, too powerful to ignore, and she goes with Naomi, back to Bethlehem.

There are doubtless times in our life when we are forced to weigh up a particular situation and make a decision. And often we will do that in a very practical and pragmatic manner. We will consider carefully the pros and the cons. We may seek advice from others who have gone through the same thing, or whose wise counsel we value. And we will come to a decision, one way or the other, sometimes not even sure that it is the correct one, but it's the best one that we can make based on the balance of probability.

There are other sorts of decisions, however, which call forth in us a very different character of choice - something that I would call 'discernment'. These decisions are less about the measurable outcomes, and more about the heart. They do not lend themselves to a strategic or linear process, but rather one that might seem to go around in circles more than anything else - choices which may seem clear one minute and less obvious the next.

And it seems to me that decisions that have to do with our faith more often than not fall into that second category. By its very nature, our faith comes from what we are able to believe, rather than what is able to be proven. And so, often, discernment about faith based issues are a journey of the heart, not necessarily a process of the mind.

We are called, as Christians, to give of ourselves - it is a mark of our faith. To the extent that we have anything, it is from God. And God desires that these gifts, these blessings, even life itself, is used to further God's Kingdom, to bring God glory. What will you do with your time, your talents, and your pledge?

As we travel together through our Planned Giving Program, and as we head towards Thanksgiving Sunday, in 3 weeks' time, I wonder how your discernment in this regard is going? I wonder whether or not you have been able to give some time to pondering what it is you feel able to offer the ministry which arises from this place?

Whilst I am sure there may be a component of your thinking and pondering which uses your head. I understand that there are practical issues which will come into consideration; that is understandable and completely acceptable. But I hope there is more...

I hope that your discernment comes from a place of love. Of love for what God has given you in your life; the opportunities, the joys, the blessings, as well as the heartaches. And I hope that it comes from a sense of love for this place, and the people who worship here and who are a part of your life because you are joined to God as brothers and sisters.

Naomi's discernment led her to believe that love won out over safe; that the right decision wasn't necessarily the easy one. All that I ask of you in your discernment is the same commitment to prayer and contemplation - that is all God asks, too, I'm sure.

By the way, and without wanting to spoil the end of the story (which you will hear next week), Ruth found a life in Bethlehem - to the extent that her faithfulness to Naomi (and to God) was rewarded in the end, with a husband, Boaz, and a child whom they named "Obed". Obed himself had a child, Jessie. And Jessie was the father of David... Yes, David - as in the House of David, from which Jesus himself was descended. In Ruth's faithfulness to God, she, a Moabite woman was used powerfully to bring forth God's plan for salvation. Such grand plans can come from small beginnings, if our discernment and commitment comes from a place of prayer... and love.

In the name of God. Amen