

Sermon preached at King's College, Cambridge

Sunday February 28th, 2016

'Naomi' in the **'Women of Spirit'** series

Taking up barely more space in your Bible than a leaf pressed between the pages sits a book called Ruth. It only takes a few minutes to read, and tells the story of two strong women: women who have no choice but to negotiate the culture of their day in which women are not just second to men but pretty much their possessions.

It is a tale of how a young widow is helped by her mother-in-law, also widowed, to find the right husband from her first husband's family. This has to be done according to careful and rigorously-enforced customs, and getting it right ensured both your moral reputation and the retention of inheritance rights within the family. The situation is not eased by the fact that Ruth is not born Jewish: she is from the land of Moab, part of what is now Jordan.

Suffice it to say that the combination of Ruth's loyal attachment to her mother-in-law, and the mother-in-law's wise advice, Ruth finds a new husband. This is Boaz, and with him she produces a son, Obed, father of Jesse, who is in turn father of David – King David, as he would become. You see why the little book made its way into the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures. And from the New Testament perspective where we are, we can look back along Jesus' own royal, Davidic origins. It was in Bethlehem that Ruth married Boaz, at one end of that remarkable family tree. Being of the same family line, the line of David, Joseph had to go to the family's traditional home town for the census even when Mary was near her time. And so it was that Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

The mother-in-law's name is Naomi, a name which means 'pleasantness'. That's a rather anodyne word for a woman whose qualities of strength and determination and wisdom enabled her not just to survive (no mean feat in itself) but to triumph. Given their status – widows – and the fact that one was not born Jewish – in a culture obsessed with purity – given this, Naomi needed to be as wise as a serpent as she was innocent as a dove. So the word 'pleasant' begins to sound more like a patronising pat on the head from the writers of their founding stories. Those men (of course, men) could let this slip of a book slip into scripture, given the neat bit of backstory it gave to King David. But they wouldn't want to get carried away with their epithets.

Well, I could stop there, having administered that feminist slap to the religious authorities of ancient Israel. But we need to jump forward three thousand years or so: because we have no good reason to be complacent about the struggles of women in today's world.

There is no shortage of depressing or even downright distressing stories about the way women are treated in all-too-many parts of the world. Stories about life under ISIS/Da'esh are a recent and particularly horrible example. But those who go to do aid work in many parts of the developing world talk of cultures where women's lives are pretty terrible; AND yet where also it's women who hold the show together in their families – often having to work, as well as

manage the household and bring up children. I'm talking in massive generalisations here, which can be misleading: but I've heard these stories many times. There are other common elements to these stories which are too graphic to articulate here, in this context.

But just as we shouldn't look complacently back to the ancient past, so we shouldn't look complacently out towards other parts of the world in this age. There are very real, very substantial miseries to be seen in the midst of our own cities. There are Naomis and Ruths aplenty in the poorer parts of those cities, and many, many more who don't manage to summon up the reserves of wisdom and cunning that those women in the ancient story had.

I got to know just a tiny bit of this in my last job. This was in a London parish which has one of the worst combinations of deprivation factors of any Church of England parish. In this, and plenty of other such areas, the struggle of people's lives is incredibly difficult to describe. This is mostly because the set of circumstances which any particular person or family might be facing are rarely quite the same as anyone else's. It takes time, endless patient attention, to learn what life is like for someone. There are rarely situations where things could be solved easily; rarely situations where right and wrong can be neatly portioned out.

I could spend a long time trying to spell this out, but in the context of this sermon and this whole sermon series, 'Women of Spirit', I want to mention one aspect. This is the extent to which women are the ones who hold things together. Not because they are saints, easy-to-admire characters like Ruth and Naomi. In many cases they find themselves simply having to cope, to survive, and just do that. But doing that, 'just doing that', can be quite an achievement in the face of all the difficulties arrayed before them.

Many of the children in the Church primary school in my old parish have no father figure at home. In some cases a woman is trying her best to bring up a host of children whose fathers are not to be seen, or who are kept away because they're violent. The school is run by a woman of great vigour, imagination and large-heartedness. It expends great energy, day after day, not just giving them the results-obsessed education required by the authorities, but also making a safe, loving, disciplined environment in which the children are given aspiration and ambition, attention and affection. We would do projects on generosity, patience, kindness and so on – and some of the things written up on wall displays were movingly direct.

In the midst of this, of course, are many good men. It's not always easy to be a good man there, especially if you have things on your record which suggest the opposite. But, praise be, they keep going, often in the face of sneering or just frightened scepticism on the part of those whose support could be more than just helpful.

All this is a massive jumble of particulars: the particular experiences of particular people. In the midst of such messy reality, a reality of no interest to certain sorts of politician and newspaper, are people of spirit, and especially many, many women of spirit. That spirit, at heart, is love: it's the outworking – in however flawed a way – of the imprint of God inside each and every one of us. We are called to recognise that in ourselves, and in everyone else: when we do that, we are building a world, we are building a kingdom by God's grace, of People of Spirit.