

Sunday 10 November 2024: Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost

When I looked at today's first reading, I realised that my wonderful year 8 students had written my sermon for me – because we recently read through the Book of Ruth together and the assessment task I gave them was to retell the whole story from the perspective of one of the main characters: Naomi, or Boaz, or Ruth herself. So – with their collective permissions – I was going to read out to you three of the responses I'd given, one from each of these three perspectives. This is known in the trade as Ignatian spirituality, the system developed by Ignatius of Loyola, who recommended slowly reading a passage from the Bible and imaging yourself in the scene, either as an onlooker or as one of the characters in the story. But then I decided I wanted to write these responses myself.

So here we go.

Naomi: God I was angry – at you, God! First you send a famine that drives my husband to decide, without consulting me of course, that we'll all move – to Moab of all places. Gentile territory, to live among those goyim, because we'll have a 'better life' over there. As if! But, off we go, and we struggle to learn the language and the customs and all that and gradually start to settle into this better life, and then you go and take him from me. What sort of God is that? So we adjust to that, Malon and Chilion my two sons and me – they adjust better because they were too young to remember the land you gave to our ancestor Abraham and his descendants. They're

so young, but old enough to do what I'd always feared – start chasing the local girls, and before I know it, also without consulting me, except as a *fait accompli* when it's all decided, they're getting married here to daughters of the goyim. Orpah and Ruth – nice enough girls they are, but not of the children of Jacob. My grandkids will be goyim themselves – they'll always be foreigners to my own ancestral land and people. And you, God, Elohim, you did this to me. God, I'm angry.

And that wasn't the end of it: you decided you'd take my two sons as well – both in the same week. Pestilence, they said; their gods were angry, they said. I don't care about the reason - the fact is, they're gone, and I'm left with two foreign daughters-in-law, always looking to me with their doe-like sorrowful eyes, as if I have an answer to their situation. So I decided to go back – they could stay and return to their families to look after them. Then blow me down if they don't want to trail along with me! Well, I did persuade Orpah to turn back, but Ruth, she clung to me: where you go, I'll go; your family will be my family, your land my land, your god – and this is the real shock after all you've done to me – your god, my god.

So anyway we get to Beth-lehem (the house of bread, for goodness' sake – as if it had given us bread, in the famine), welcomes me back, except that I change my name – not 'pleasant' (Naomi) any more, but bitter, that's what they can call me. It was not so easy for Ruth – though secretly I was glad she came with me, I had no one else –

but the town wasn't very welcoming to a foreign woman who didn't speak our language and didn't know our customs.

But I noticed my husband's kinsman Boaz taking an interest in Ruth. I was pleased – she needed some cheering up, some attention that was positive, not just suspicious and gossipy.

Boaz. I'd heard my cousin's widow was back in town, and realised this might become a burden for me. So I chose not to notice, not to reach out to her. After all she had her own family and an even nearer relative of her husband in town. Not my problem. I had enough of my own problems already. I won't bore you with them. Then one day during barley harvest I went out to check on my workers, and saw this absolutely stunning young woman following them and collecting grain along the edges of the fields, as our law allows. Who was she? I asked my foreman Eli and he told me: she's the widow who came back with Naomi, from somewhere foreign – Moab I think. Somewhere like that. She's a good worker, I'll give her that – even though she's bit goy. She's a stunner I tell you, and I feel a bit protective – I know it can be dangerous around here for unattached youngish women, didn't we have that incident just last week with Miriam, the daughter of Saul (but no, I won't go there). So I go up to this young woman, it's my land she's on after all, and introduce myself. Stay on my land, I say, and take as much as you need. And next moment, blow me down, she's on her knees with her face to the ground, thanking me for my

generosity. God, these foreign types, I'll tell you, with their outlandish customs. So I say – get up, you're in Bethlehem now, under the protection of the God of Israel, who's not too keen on subservience, so just get up and stop being so damn histrionic. Of course you're welcome here. And I turn to me day labourers and say – now you just leave her alone, and if you don't give her whatever she needs, you'll be hearing from me.

Ruth: I didn't want to go back to my family – in fact I'd married an Israelite to get away from them. Economic refugees my family had called them, coming in here, taking our jobs, not to mention our daughters. No – no way was I going back there. Eventually Naomi gave in – yes, I could come with her. But it wouldn't be easy. The Israelites were a bit nationalistic you might say; not too keen on foreigners. And she was right. The walk to Bethlehem was one thing; settling in as an outsider was another thing again. Naomi was welcomed back, in theory (family loyalty and all that), but with no guarantee of practical financial support. I didn't speak the language and didn't know the customs. It was ok to walk down the street with Naomi, but on my own – well that was another matter altogether. Eventually, after sitting around for a few days with Naomi feeling sorry for herself I decided: bugger this, I'm going out gleaning. This was a practice allowed for in their Hebrew law – quite enlightened actually – that landowners were not allowed to harvest all the way to the fence line, but leave grain for the poor to harvest. So that's what I did – till midday, when the big boss came along and noticed me. He let me eat with his

workers, and made sure I had enough to take home that evening. I could see Naomi scheming when I told her about my day. Just wait for the harvest; go to the threshing floor in your best clothes, and see where Boaz falls asleep. They'll all be exhausted, and a bit tipsy, so just lie down beside him- I know he wants you, but just do it as I say. I know these people. So I did. Boaz woke up in the night and saw me – so then I put the hard word on him, as Naomi had advised. You're our relative, I said, marry me. And he said – almost said – yes, but I need to consult the elders, you being a foreigner and all. Besides, there's Jacob your father-in-law's brother. I need the ok from him. So I go home to Naomi who's all over me to know what's gone on and how I got on. She says to me: Boaz will be fine – he'll settle this today. I'm not quite sure what she means, but I learn soon enough when he knocks on the door to say the other relative, Jacob, and the town elders have agreed to our marriage. So I'm in – an insider now, married to one of the leading landowners, with an assured place. No one's daring to call me a goy or a foreigner now. And Naomi can't stop smiling – even more so when she knows she's to be a grandmother.

Story of Ruth in three acts. Amen!