

### **Ruth 4 When emptiness is undone**

I guess I'm a typical bloke and like those 'shoot 'em up' movies. I like watching anything with Clint Eastwood in it. I like Arnie movies. I like spy thrillers and courtroom dramas. But – I mean don't tell too many people, but I do actually enjoy Romantic comedies as well. Although I think I prefer to watch them by myself so I can cry a bit at the end and no one notice.

You know... *Sleepless in Seattle*, when they nearly miss her at the end, but they come back and there she is. Or *You've Got Mail*, where she's waiting for mystery man in the gardens and Fox is coming around the corner calling out for Brinkley his dog and then she says something like – 'Oh I wanted it to be you'. Or *Notting Hill* where Hugh Grant realises that he's been an idiot and asks Julia Roberts a question about whether she will take him back and she says yes and suddenly you've got Elvis Costello singing 'She'.

Well Ruth is the '*You've Got Mail*' of the Bible – If you want *The Thin Red Line* or *The Hurt Locker*, you'll have to go back to Joshua.

You know the story.. Naomi has been off in Moab, her sons marry Moabite women. But the husband dies, the sons die, they're left without hope and so Naomi returns to Israel, but Ruth won't leave her and so comes with her. Ruth becomes an Israelite. But Naomi still feels like God has given her a hard life. Ruth then meets Boaz, who looks after her while she goes about getting food from the field. Ruth, under Naomi's instructions, then takes some initiative in this relationship and goes into him at night, probably got the movie a PG or M rating. But Boaz acts honourably. How will the movie end?

Well Boaz finds the person who has the right to the land and to marry Ruth – the nearest relative. Boaz tells him that Naomi is selling some land. Now that is a bit misleading, because you couldn't really sell land that belonged to a family or a clan. It means more that Naomi is 'surrendering the right to the land'. Does the next of kin want to redeem the land? He says yes. Boaz then says but you also get Ruth in the package. Now neither of these guys had to marry Ruth. Boaz is acting on the spirit of the law not the letter of the law. The next of kin says no. Why? Because he says verse 6, 'I cannot redeem it for myself without damaging my own inheritance.' That is he doesn't take the package deal, not because he doesn't desire Ruth or something. It is because if he redeemed the land, Naomi and Ruth would get to use it till they died, and only if there were no heirs would he then get the land. If he marries Ruth as well, then surely there will be heirs for the land as well. He is acting purely out of whether he could get some land longer term.

So then there is this strange ceremony of taking off the sandal. And then Boaz states in front of all the witnesses in the town that he will take Ruth. And here is the romantic end. After 10 years of infertility, she gets together and the Lord gives her a child. And Naomi who had no hope, no sons and no husband becomes the wet nurse and the women declare, 'A son has been born to Naomi.' And then like a Tasmanian marrying the crown prince of Denmark, we find out that Ruth's great grand son is none other than King David himself.

So what do we learn from Ruth 4?

Firstly, God is at work in the 'coincidences'. As you go through the book the coincidences kind of mount up. The way the famine had ended in Israel, just when Naomi needed to return. The way Ruth meets Boaz in the field. The way the next of kin comes to the gate just as Boaz had gone there – verse 1. The way Ruth can

suddenly get pregnant having been unable to conceive for 10 years. Sometimes the text says specifically that God is involved like in verse 13, ‘The Lord made her conceive’, but for most of the book God is not said specifically to act. Yet it seems that in hindsight God is at work and the coincidences aren’t really coincidences.

I remember when I first became a Christian and started praying and I prayed that I’d find a good church – and then I did – and I thought – oh that’s just a coincidence. And then I’d pray that I would pass my exam and then I did and then I thought – oh that’s a coincidence. And then I’d pray that I would be able to fix mum’s car that I’d crashed – and I couldn’t pay for it to be fixed, but a friend came over and we got it going again – and I thought – that’s a coincidence. And then I thought, well perhaps they aren’t coincidences but God at work.

I think it’s good sometimes not just to be looking forward all the time but to take some time to look back and see how God has been at work in your life for ages and how he’s answered prayers and just put situations in place that meant something worked for you. I’m not saying that everything is always rosy – but often we just think things are coincidences, even answers to prayer, when really if we stopped and looked we would see that God has been at work all the time. I guess it’s something that I don’t do, but think it would be a good idea and that is keep a prayer diary. I mean the times I have written down what I’ve prayed for and then a month later been able to go back and tick so many of them off. God at work in the coincidences.

The book of Ruth also shows us God’s love modelled. Remember Ruth is set in the time of the judges – as it says in Judges 17, all the people did what was right in their own eyes. The people were self absorbed, self concerned, self driven, looking after number 1; dare I say not much different to today. Ruth and Boaz then stand in

stark contrast to that - not being concerned for themselves but for the welfare of others.

Boaz takes the initiative in order to redeem the land and Ruth; the next of kin is only interested when Boaz mentions it and then only interested if he gets the land longer term. Just like God takes the initiative in our salvation, so Boaz takes the initiative here. Acting like God acts.

Boaz acts according to the law. He doesn't just elope with Ruth after the threshing room floor. He goes to the public place and offers the deal to the next of kin as he should have. He makes the effort to find the next of kin and to gather the elders needed to be witnesses. He is a man of integrity. He knows what he wants, but he won't act just pragmatically, he will act with integrity according to the law. He acts as God has instructed. I guess that's something we could learn in a world where we always want the quick fix rather than acting with integrity. Like we want to buy our own house as fast as possible and if we have to sacrifice giving to the church and the poor to do that then we will. We'll take the mortgage we need first and then consider our giving second – or fifth.

Boaz acts as the redeemer. In the end his actions redeeming the land and Ruth and hence Naomi and therefore the name of Elimelech models what God has done for Israel. God had redeemed Israel from Egypt. God acts as a redeemer. Here Boaz acts in a small and personal way as God acts. Perhaps we should look to how we act as a redeemer sometimes... or not. Are we about saving and serving ourselves, or happy to save and serve others? Boaz models God's love in his initiative in his obedience to the law and as he acts as the redeemer.

Ruth, too, as we have seen throughout the book, models God's love. I mean, virtually more than anyone else in the Old Testament Ruth demonstrates what it

means to ‘love God with all your heart, Deuteronomy 6, and to love ‘your neighbour as yourself’, Leviticus 19. Her commitment to God and to Naomi in chapter one is full on. The ironic thing is that it is someone who was originally a Moabite that shows Israel how they are supposed to live.

Both Ruth and Boaz model God’s love in the way they act. They act like God acts. I mean do you ever ask yourself that question? Would God do what I’m doing now? Is this the sort of thing that models to others what God does? Is this thing that I’m doing acting in the law, acting with integrity, acting in love, acting as the redeemer? Am I acting like God acts? Am I acting in the world in the ways God does? What would Jesus do? The book of Ruth doesn’t teach us anything particularly clever or detailed about God, but we could do well to sit and think about how Ruth and Boaz acted and whether we come close to modelling God’s love in this world.

God at work in coincidences, God’s love modelled and then God’s blessing.

God honours Boaz. It’s his name that has been preserved for perpetuity, not the next of kin’s – we don’t even know his name. The people themselves honour Boaz in verse 11 following – they can recognize the godly actions of this man. In the genealogy at the end of the passage, verse 21, if you count them up, Boaz is the 7<sup>th</sup> listed. I mean you don’t want to make too much out of numbers, but the seventh was the most important for Israelites – he is deliberately honoured by the writer of this book. There is honour for his godliness.

And I believe that God still honours godliness today. Certainly God will not bless ungodliness. God will honour godliness, both in God’s direct blessing of us, in others recognising that godliness and longer term how we store up riches in heaven. God for instance may honour your godliness by bringing your best friend to faith in Christ – precisely because your friend recognised your godliness.

And God honours Ruth. Her faith and commitment has already led to more than she could have expected. I mean from virtually starving, to marrying a wealthy man who is obviously a great and godly man of integrity to giving her a son. And yet God is going to do immeasurably more than even Ruth could see. For it is through her line that the greatest king of Israel will come. David her great grandson. And yet even more there she is in Matthew chapter 1, as we celebrate at Christmas time, in the line of the great King of kings himself our Lord Jesus.

Imagine what God might do in the future because of your Godliness and life. Maybe your son will be Archbishop of Melbourne. Maybe your grand daughter will run the biggest youth group in Melbourne here at St Mark's. Maybe your relative will create such a wonderful system of aid and development that Africa has no more poverty. Imagine what God might do in the future because of the way you lived and acted now.

Finally we see how God has blessed Naomi. God has restored Naomi. Firstly it begins subtly with God creating a no brainer with the famine and bringing Naomi back to Israel. Then the faithful service of her daughter in law Ruth. Then the daily provision of her needs through the gleaning of the food. And finally the overt restoration through the marriage and the baby. 'Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next of kin.' She even becomes the wet nurse so that the women can say, 'A son has been born to Naomi.' Her childlessness is restored.

And God at work in the world today has blessed us, not just with our country and our church and our friends...

But God has blessed us, by redeeming us. Galatians 3: 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.'

And God has blessed us for we will be rulers with him in the heavenly places.

Ephesians 2: 'God has raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus'.

And God has blessed us for Jesus says, John 15: 'I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.'

Praise God that he has so richly blessed us.