

# Where did they flock from? Ruth 1.1-5

Today's TFTD on Ruth comes from Robin:

The Book of Ruth tells the story of Ruth. She is a foreigner who comes to live in Judea. She marries a Jewish man. One of her descendants is David. Another is Joseph, husband of the mother of Jesus. This is a story that tells of the foreign blood flowing in the veins of Jewish royalty. There is no doubt it was told in order to present a more inclusive narrative of Jewish history than other versions that were available, specifically those presented in the books of Nehemiah and Ezra.

We may think of it as a story of a Jewish man, Boaz, who helped and then married a foreigner, a foreign refugee, Ruth. But that is not the whole story. There is of course a back story to why Ruth came to be in Judea and the first five verses of the first chapter tell us this story.

It is the story of a man and his wife who had to leave their country of origin because there was a famine in the land and go and live in another country where they were able to make a living. Judea was the country they left. Moab was the country that accepted them. So before a Moabite woman ever came to Judea looking for refuge, a Jewish family had travelled to Moab to seek refuge. They were economic migrants. And they found what they needed in Moab.

The Old Testament commands the people of God to be kind to the foreigner in their midst reminding them that they too were once foreigners in the land of Egypt, having gone there to escape famine. In the same way, the story of Ruth searching for acceptance in Judea starts with a story of a Jewish family who found acceptance in her homeland, Moab.

So often the back story to economic migration is forgotten and when it is forgotten people can reach profoundly mistaken conclusions about migrants. Mrs Duffy was the lady who, during the 2010 election campaign, became famous for asking Gordon Brown 'where all these Eastern Europeans had flocked from?' as if they had dropped out of the sky.

Gordon Brown didn't answer her question. He didn't explain how following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the European Union had offered the countries of Eastern Europe membership on condition of sweeping economic reforms that devastated their economies and threw millions of people out of work so that many of them were forced to come to the western countries of the Union where they worked hard and offered skills that made a significant net contribution to the economy of the whole Union to the mutual benefit of all its members. This is the back story of this economic migration. 'These Eastern Europeans' first choice would, on the whole, have been to stay where they were. But economic migrants are people who don't get their first choice. They are the people who take the risks that provide prosperity for all. Instead Gordon Brown muttered some platitudes to bring the conversation to an end and was then caught on microphone calling Mrs Duffy a bigoted woman for which he later had to apologise.

The absence of leadership that this encounter typifies has given rise to widespread hostility towards economic migrants. People say that our services are overwhelmed by economic migrants as if it is impossible for a growing economy fuelled by migration to fund and build additional

hospitals and schools. People say that the country is 'too crowded' and I am never quite sure what that means. People bizarrely accuse foreigners of simultaneously entering illegally, stealing our jobs and bleeding the country dry by claiming benefits. Most economic migrants are of course here legally, working and paying taxes.

Just like the story of Ruth's migration to Judea, economic migration to the United Kingdom has an equivalent back story. Why do so many people want to come and live in the United Kingdom? I have asked that question to people from many nations who are living in some of the poorest parts of the United Kingdom in the city of Manchester. Many of these people had the option to stay in another part of the European Union and came to the United Kingdom via another state. 'Why did you come here?' I asked them, indicating the poverty of Harpurhey or Moss Side outside the window.

They always gave two reasons.

One was language. They spoke English. They spoke English because a long time ago, before any Somalis or Yemenis or Nigerians ever thought of coming to England, some English people went to their country. If we think it has been stressful having Nigerians move to Manchester, I think it is fair to say that Nigerians found the arrival of the English in past centuries, a lot more stressful.

The second reason was one I always loved to hear. It filled me with pride. Over and over again, people told me that the United Kingdom is the country in Europe that offers the best opportunities to foreigners. This is a place where our children can grow up as part of the national culture, get an education and build a good life. Better than France, better than the Netherlands, better than Denmark, better than Italy? 'Yes', they would reply, 'this is the best country.'

In the Old Testament, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell the story of a nation that espoused racial purity. But that's not the whole story. The Book of Ruth tells another story. It is a story of acceptance and welcome. It is a story with a family that found refuge first in one foreign country and then returned as foreigners to their home country. It is the story of a nation that became stronger because of the contribution made by migrants.

This is also the story of our nation. We sent our sons and daughters all round the world looking for new lives and better opportunities. We still do. And we welcome to our country people looking for a better life, who chose us because their ancestors knew our ancestors. And so they believed that if they came to us, they would be welcomed.

And, as well as being the story of our nation, it is the story of humanity. People have always been coming and going. And they have done so with God's blessing.