

A personal reflection on Boaz.

As others have noted in their reflections, the book of Ruth is an odd book in the Old Testament because God is hardly mentioned at all and he doesn't direct any of the action in an obvious way. That means it is very easy to interpret the book from many different angles and all of them probably have a grain of truth in them.

A popular reading of the book is that Boaz is a foreshadowing of Christ. He redeems Ruth and Naomi, Ruth representing Gentiles and Naomi Israel. He rescues them from the harsh and difficult lives of being widows in that culture, especially Ruth as a foreign widow whose life would have been especially difficult and dangerous without the protection of relatives. *(Side point: I do wonder what her home life must have been like for her to choose to stay rather than return home, or maybe she was just extremely devoted to Naomi.)*

To redeem means 'to buy back', Boaz buys Naomi's husband's land and Ruth in order to provide a (male) heir for Elimelech, Naomi's dead husband, to continue his name because he is their kinsman-redeemer. Jesus buys us back or pays the price for us saving us from sin and death. I can see the parallel, we no longer have to worry because Jesus has paid the price that we could never afford to pay, we should be as happy as Naomi and Ruth at the end of the book.

But, there is something in the story of Ruth and Boaz, that doesn't sit right with me, it has that grain of truth but also a different angle. Naomi is a lady who has had to endure a lot of hardship but doesn't seem to have done anything to bring it on herself and Ruth is a character showing a huge amount of bravery, loyalty and courage. It seems so unfair that they need redeeming! The reason they need to be bought back is because they are women in a male-dominated world. The law in Deuteronomy and Leviticus the kinsman-redeemer idea is based on prioritising continuing the dead husband's name, and actually forbids the widow from marrying outside the family even if she had the opportunity!

Now, this reflection is meant to be about Boaz. His character is a one of privilege: he is male, he is wealthy, and he gets to choose if he wants to rescue these women or not. *(Another side point: What would have happened if Naomi had convinced Ruth to stay behind in Moab? To be kinsman-redeemer then Boaz would have had to marry Naomi. I wonder what he would have done then?)* He is in a position of power over Ruth and he chooses to be kind but he could have just as easily not been. That is the scary bit - through no fault of their own, these women of good character have their lives in the hands of someone else.

Power and privilege are things we talk about a lot at the moment. Who has the power in society? What is privilege? Well, I think this story has something to say: if you can choose to help, to relieve hardship, you have power and privilege. It might be using your white privilege to stand up for someone without it, or your privilege of being born here to help someone settle in who wasn't. It could be your economic privilege to give to people who don't have or stand up using your voice for people who don't have one of their own. We are all, in some way, Boaz - powerful and privileged because we all have the choice to love our neighbours in some way or not.

The culture Boaz, Ruth and Naomi lived in was horribly unfair but so is ours. We have to understand that we live in the 6th richest country in the world and that means we all have some kind of power and privilege. But this country is also very unfair, the richest 6 people own as much as the poorest 13 million! And it is mostly a lottery as to where you are born and if you are a have or a have not.

So what can we take from this story where God doesn't speak and tell us the right choice to make? Well, I take from the life of Boaz that he used his power to help; he didn't have the power to change the culture or to rescue everyone but he did what he could to make life better, or fairer for those not as blessed as him. We could wait for a fairer world, where loving our neighbour doesn't cost us anything but we will be waiting for a long time. We can all use our power to make the one we have a little fairer by following Boaz example.

To put it another way in the words of Michael Jackson:

“If, you want to make the world a better place, take a look at yourself and make a change”.

Or if you prefer:

Do not withhold good for those to which it is due when it is in your power to act (Proverbs 3:27).

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