

Redeeming: Ruth 3.6-15

At midnight the man was startled, and turned over, and there, lying at his feet, was a woman! He said, Who are you? She said, I am Ruth, your servant; spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin. He said, May you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter.

Harvest has always been one of my favourite times of year. I remember a Harvest Festival in Eskdale, many years ago, bathed in October sunshine. The church was decorated with marrows and Michaelmas daisies; the mood was generous; the congregation was welcoming. Harvest is a time for expansiveness, for letting down the barriers, for welcoming the stranger. Inhibitions are relaxed — but only so far. So we said our good-byes and went down to the pub for lunch. Sitting outside in the sunshine, I noticed there was a party going on in the garden opposite. Glasses chinking, a hum of conversation, gales of laughter — it sounded good. Then I realized that it was the same people that we'd just met at the church. The same good cheer and friendliness — only this was a private party, and we weren't invited. Why should we be? We were only tourists. Good luck to them. But it stuck in my mind as a parable of the complexities of belonging. There's belonging — and there's *really* belonging. There's welcoming the stranger with a coffee — and there's becoming one of us. It would take more than a Harvest Festival to make us part of village life.

So harvest was a good time for Ruth and Naomi to return home. They were empty-handed — but the harvest was good, there were fields to be gleaned, there was a place for the stranger, alongside the women in the fields. And Ruth struck lucky on her first day (ch.2). It was a good start. But it wasn't enough — and Naomi knew that. She knew they needed more than the gleanings of a summer's generosity to survive the winter. Two widows, without husbands or sons to support them, would be in a precarious position — still on the wrong side of the barriers. The only solution — the only real security for a woman, in that time and place — was marriage.

That's why Naomi was so excited about the God-shaped "coincidence" that led Ruth to glean in Boaz' field (2.19-23). Boaz evidently like Ruth. She was young and attractive — he was unmarried and prosperous, with a secure place in the village pecking order. (Shades of Jane Austen's Mrs Bennett — but then, things weren't that much different in 18th-century England.) And he was "family" — he was the "next-of-kin", the "Redeemer". This is a bit harder for us to understand (and indeed the technical legalities are probably lost in the mists of time). But in ancient Israelite culture, that gave him a legal interest in protecting the inheritance (and the bloodline) of his dead kinsman — keeping it in the family, we might say. It gave him a stake in what happened to the two women.

And maybe — in any culture — it made it harder for Boaz to shrug off the two widows as “not my problem”. Being “family” means you *really* belong — even if you’re a foreigner (or does it?).

So Naomi sets about making a plan: *My daughter, I need to seek some security for you so that it may be well with you* (v.1). It involves making the most of that harvest-home atmosphere, when barriers are down and inhibitions are relaxed. The threshing-floor was the ideal location — outside the village so the chaff could blow away, away from prying eyes. There’s only one problem. The person who has the riskiest part to play in Naomi’s plan is Ruth. Naomi’s plan involves making the most of her only asset — Ruth’s sexuality. It’s Ruth who has to *put on her best clothes* and her make-up (v.3), and *go down to the threshing-floor* when everybody’s making merry, and quietly sneak in in the dark, when Boaz is drunk (v.7), and *lie down at his feet*(v.4). It’s Ruth who stakes everything on her ultimate vulnerability as a woman (something many refugee women are forced to do). It’s a huge gamble — and it might not even work! Girls who come to the threshing-floor at night are easy prey — easy come, easy go. Not the kind of girl you’d want to marry — especially if she’s a foreigner.

So what does that make Naomi? A careful provider, using her wits to survive in a man’s world? — or a cynical exploiter of a vulnerable young woman? And what does it make Ruth? Is she a co-conspirator — or a victim? What was really going on, out there on the threshing floor in the middle of the night? What would your answer be? It’s certainly a question that fascinates readers today — as we’ll see from our TFTD reflections this week.

Re-reading this story has made me more attentive to Boaz’ part in it too. He’s obviously flattered that Ruth chose him rather than one of the young men (v.10) — so maybe he was rather shy and modest. He’s careful to protect Ruth’s reputation (v.14). Whatever has passed between these two is private — neither of them is out to coerce or shame the other. Boaz seems to be a decent bloke who wants to do the right thing. And he’s really impressed with Ruth’s loyalty to her mother-in-law (2.11).

Boaz is so close! He’s got a strong sense that *Someone* ought to be looking out for Ruth. He just doesn’t realize that that someone is him. Ruth clearly deserves God’s blessing what she has done: *May the Lord reward you for all your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!* (2.12). What he doesn’t get — until Ruth takes the risky step of placing herself under his protection — is that the channel of God’s blessing for Ruth is — Boaz! (3.9) And even then he suddenly produces another “next-of-kin” we’ve never even heard of, and another layer of legal red tape (3.13).

It's easy to ask God to bless other people. Sometimes we're incredibly slow to accept that the channel of God's blessing is — you!

God bless, Loveday

Make me a channel of your peace:

where there is hatred let me bring your love;

where there is injury, your pardon, Lord;

and where there's doubt, true faith in you.