

Priorities: Family, Wealth, and Status

St Columba, 8 November 2009

Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17
Mark 12:38-44

Introduction *(Before the first reading)*

Susan last week noted how difficult it was in Hebrew culture for women to survive without men. That's been true for many cultures until very recently.

And the biblical material has quite a lot to say about this, pushing for women who have lost husbands or sons to be looked after, because of their vulnerable state.

Refugees, orphans, and widows ó the Jewish law identified a responsibility for these economically and physically vulnerable members of society, usually by allowing them to glean, to pick up the left-over grain after harvest.

This is why Ruth was prepared to support her mother-in-law Naomi: they were both without either husbands or sons, and Ruth saw that the best chance for survival was to stick together.

Naomi now saw another chance: a rich man! Boaz was a relative of Elimelech, Naomi's dead husband (and the end of this book tells us that his father was Salmon ó perhaps the founder of my whakapapa!). Boaz had lots of grain, and Ruth and Naomi survived by gleaning from his grain.

Then Naomi had a better idea, one designed to secure a longer-term future

Let's hear about that

The Ruth and Boaz Story *(after the readings)*

One

Naomi found Ruth a rich man.

But Jesus ó according to Markø's story, and heard also in other places ó doesn't want us to value wealth too highly. We really do get hung up on money, on the economic health of the country or the world, on our own earning power and ability to buy what we want.

Of course, the basics are necessary, and stories about Destiny Church make me cautious about the widow in Markø's story, who gave ðall she had to live onö to what we can think of as the church of her day.

Thatø a damaging expectation, and dangerous for its effects on people who have little to come and go on. Did she then have to borrow from Instant Finance?

But Jesusø overall point is important: wealth and social status are not the most important things in life. We are warned not to seek honour or fame, or to act as if we are more important than other people.

Seeking riches is certainly not what Jesusø good news is about.

Although Naomi found a source of food and protection through a rich relative, thatø not the core of Ruthø's story.

Two

In fact, in the Naomi and Ruth story there's another twist to continuing the twists and turns in the story that Susan spoke about last week: remember that a series of good fortune followed by bad, with Ruth's faithfulness a continuing thread.

It's not clear here whether *these* twists are meant to be good or bad. Finding the rich man *seems* like a good thing for Ruth and Naomi (though Jesus' view might question that). But what about this next move?

Naomi tells Ruth to have a shower, put on some perfume and her best clothes, and creep into where Boaz is sleeping. She then tells her to uncover his feet.

Uncover his feet? This creates great debate among biblical scholars that at least some of them think the original has been changed: it's not his *feet* she was going to uncover!

Certainly the whole event is a seduction. Ruth uses sexual power to get what she wants. Not for the first time, or the last.

These days we're much more conscious of the power dynamics of sexuality, which are central to this story. Both men and women are capable of using their sexual power to get what they want, through violence or by manipulation. This seems to be what Naomi is encouraging Ruth to do.

And the outcome is a baby.

It's presented here as a *good* story: As a result, Naomi and Ruth now have real security; Ruth has a son, and a husband; they both gain a new family; and they enter into God's plan, culminating in the great king David.

Three

In the light of Jesus's story in Mark, the good thing here is that finally it's **family** that Naomi and Ruth see as important. The riches they gain are not the money or the food, but family life.

And the deeper message is about the faithfulness that Naomi and Ruth show to each other. This faithfulness, or 'loving-kindness', is presented as an example of God's ongoing love for us all and *anyone* even the most marginalised, as Ruth was able to model it.

This expresses perhaps the deepest insight in the First (or Old) Testament: the concept of *hesed* or the kind of love that doesn't give up; that's not deserved; that shows itself in loyalty and faithfulness. The kind of faithful love that Ruth had for Naomi, and Naomi returned.

This is the love that can be part of family, and makes sure our communities work well or it's about caring for each other and fostering relationships and strong communities.

None of it is about status or power or 'what we own' or we need to tell that to both Rodney Hide and Brian Tamaki!

As for Naomi and Ruth, with all the twists and turns of fortune they encountered, the core of a worthwhile life is in our relationships.

That's what the bible stories tell us; that's what *we* stand for.