

**Church of Scotland
The Netherlorn Churches**

5 August 2018 “Beyond Self-Sufficiency”

Ruth 3:1-18; Job 19:25-27

Finding Hope in Dark Days

The Book of Ruth, which we have been reading in our services during this summer season, is an intensely human tale. It focuses in on one family and their experiences of birth, death and marriage – the same decisive experiences that define our life today. There are other striking parallels with our world today, such as the conditions of conflict and famine that force people to become refugees; and the vulnerability of migrants who have had to leave their own country to make a life somewhere else. But there are also aspects of the story that seem to us strange and puzzling. Two people falling in love and getting married, this we can easily understand. But there are features of the story of Ruth and Boaz that do not easily comply with our ideas of romance. It seems like very brazen behavior for Ruth to go and lie at the feet of Boaz when he is asleep at night. And Boaz’s reaction is even stranger – he is obviously touched by Ruth’s approach but before taking things any further he has to go and check it out with someone else, whom Ruth has not even met, but who evidently has a prior claim.

By this stage, we have probably realized that this is a very different kind of society with very different arrangements in regard to marriage and family from those familiar to us. A fundamental difference between life then and now is that there was no welfare state. If you suffered misfortunes in life normally your only source of support was your own family. This led to the development of two institutions that shaped Ruth’s story. The first is levirate marriage. If a married man died at a young age, the family remained responsible for his widow and normally this responsibility would be exercised by the widow being married to a brother of her late husband. To us, this sounds like a strange and even oppressive arrangement but we need to remember that it was nearly impossible for a widow to live on her own and that there was a premium placed on

continuing the family line. The new marriage allowed the possibility that the woman could bear children “for” her late husband, thus enabling the family line to continue.

Intertwined with the institution of levirate marriage in the story of Ruth is another institution that made sense in a situation where you depended on your family for support when things were tough. This is what has been called the “kinsman redeemer”. It was important for a family to maintain its property so if someone in the family became poor and was obliged to sell part of the property, an obligation fell on the next of kin to redeem that property – to get it back – if he possibly could. This could be applied not only to property but also to a person. If someone became so poor that they had to sell themselves into slavery, there was an obligation on their next of kin to redeem them out of that condition.

This was a matter of family solidarity but in Israel’s case it also went deeper – because of the covenant God had made with them they had sacred obligations towards one another. God is the sort of God who stands by the oppressed, who calls a people to be his own covenant family by rescuing them from slavery, who with his mighty arm liberates the captives and offers them a new freedom and a new hope. It is within this framework of faith that the role of the kinsman redeemer was understood – by his actions on behalf of those in need he would demonstrate within family relationships something of the character of their covenant God.

With this background knowledge, we can understand better what is going on in Ruth’s life in the story that we read today. We can understand, for one thing, why Naomi was so concerned to find a way that Ruth could marry again. As a widow and a foreigner she was very insecure. Indeed the dark shadow hanging over the story is the danger of Ruth being molested, subject to sexual violence. We can understand also why Naomi was so excited by the fact that Ruth had, apparently by chance, ended up gleaning in a field that belonged to Boaz who turned out to be a relative of Naomi’s late husband Elimelech and who therefore had responsibilities towards them.

It was this understanding that allowed Naomi and Ruth to hatch their bold plan. They had concluded that, in all the circumstances, the best way forward for Ruth would be to enter into a levirate marriage to Boaz, thus securing her own position and creating the possibility that she might have children who would continue the family line. The next step was to alert Boaz to the idea. There was a conventional way of doing this. Hence Ruth's nocturnal subterfuge that led to Boaz waking in the middle of the night to find her lying at his feet. Before we jump to conclusions as to what might have happened that night, Ruth was following a convention that Boaz immediately understood very well. This was a request for him to take on the responsibilities of a levirate marriage.

Happily for Ruth, he was willing to do this and immediately expressed his respect and admiration for what she was doing. He also quickly realized that there was a snag. While it was true that Boaz was a relative and could be called upon to marry Ruth, there was someone else who was a closer relative and therefore needed to be given first refusal.

What we see in the encounter of Boaz and Ruth are two people meeting a painful situation in life with great integrity and a high sense of responsibility. They are both deeply concerned to do what is right. More than that, to do it wholeheartedly and generously. So Ruth put herself in that very vulnerable position, trusting that she was doing the right thing and that God would be with her. Boaz responded with equal generosity, ensuring that while he fully investigated the family situation Naomi and Ruth would be abundantly supplied with barley from the harvest.

The social arrangements might look complicated and rather strange to us but there is a fundamental point to the story of Ruth that none of us should miss. When things have gone terribly wrong in life, that does not have to be the end of the story. With God there is always hope. There is always the fresh possibility that pain and anguish and desolation can give way to healing and hope and a new beginning.

Beyond Self-Sufficiency

There is something else not to be missed in the story of Ruth. Her unhappy predicament is resolved by the action of a redeemer. We have tried to understand the social circumstances in which it made sense within a family for one member to have the responsibility to redeem the situation when another member had suffered misfortune. The social arrangements by which this took effect in ancient in Israel might seem very far from our own experience. But might there be a deeper point here? Ruth was someone who was in need of redemption. As we identify with her in her hurt and loss and disorientation, might we realize that we too are in need of redemption? That is a question that the Bible aims to prompt.

It is not a question that we easily accommodate in our modern way of thinking where we have placed a premium on self-sufficiency. We have done our best to construct a society that can tick along nicely on its own terms, without any great need to think of God at all, never mind think of God in terms of redemption. And we are encouraged to construct our own lives on the same pattern. Even mutual dependence within families is under strain as we become ever more individualistic and self-sufficient. Being in need of redemption is not part of the script in a modern way of life.

The question we are asked today is whether it is this modern script or Ruth's situation with all its vulnerability and need for redemption that is more true to our own experience when we are honest with ourselves? It has to be said that it is not going too well with the self-sufficiency project. For one thing, it has become increasingly clear that we have built our modern economy and society by means that are proving devastating to our environment. Climate change is a reality, already making life very difficult for people like our friends at Bemvu. And it is clear that it has been caused by the excessive burning of fossil fuels, which has been the engine of our modern way of life. So much for self-sufficiency if we create an environment where life becomes unsustainable.

Another reality that gives us much pause for thought is the extent of the conflict and warfare that marks our time, with the resultant refugee crisis. In modern warfare it is civilians, often women and children, who take the brunt of the devastation. Can we be surprised that people choose to abandon their homes, even though they know that life as a refugee will be painful and hazardous? The result is a refugee crisis in Europe that no one knows how to resolve.

Amidst all this we have Brexit. Whatever its faults, the European Union has provided in our lifetime a framework of peace and security and economic cooperation. Now we are about to break away from the Union and enter uncharted territory. It is not our purpose here to get into the politics of Brexit but we are clearly struggling to find a convincing way forward. Many are disillusioned with our political set-up but this can more easily be expressed destructively than in any promising alternative vision.

All in all, self-sufficiency does not seem to be going too well. Might current trends prompt us to think again? This is not to slip into the caricature of the doleful Christian who always thinks that everything is going to the dogs – like Private Fraser in Dad’s Army always concluding that “We are all doomed”. Rather it is to enter into our shared perplexity at the current direction of things not with a set of glib answers but with a readiness to search for the meaning of our humanity and – to speak of a redeemer.

For the kinsman-redeemer who proved to be the answer to Ruth’s situation points us to the one who became closely related to us and brought to our situation the power of redemption. At the end of the day we are all people like Ruth – vulnerable, confused, searching. If we can take the hint from her story we can find that, wonder of wonders, there **is** a redeemer who is the answer to our predicament: Jesus Christ has come and lived and died to fulfill this very function – to be for us a redeemer, the one who puts right all that has been amiss. Whether we are thinking of the direction of our society or our own very personal circumstances, the good news is that a redeemer is at hand. We can all have that

sense of relief and wonder that Naomi and Ruth experienced when they realized that Boaz might be the answer to their plight. We too may have a redeemer.

In the name of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen