

Dear Friends,

RUTH 1: 1-6

When is the story set?

In the time of the judges.

What is life like for the people in the story?

There is famine in the land. Picture it. The fields are barren. Nothing is growing. The people are hungry. They look at their tiny store of food and have no idea how they are going to make it last.

Where does the story begin?

In Bethlehem. That's cruel. The traditional understanding is that Bethlehem means "House of Bread". As our story begins there's not much bread being baked in Bethlehem.

Who is the story about?

A man is introduced first, Elimelech. But the focus will soon move from him. He has a wife, Naomi. She has a promising name. Naomi means "Sweet" or "Pleasant". Elimelech can expect life with Naomi to be good. They have two sons. Their names suggest that there may be trouble ahead. Mahlon means "Sickness" and Chilion "Destruction".

This family do what desperate people are still forced to do. They leave behind their homes and all that is familiar. They pack what they can carry and become refugees. They go to Moab. Last time I wrote about how some in Israel may have said, "Can anything good come out of Moab?" Well something good does come out of Moab. The family get enough of a welcome to be able to settle there. The negative voices say, "Just wait, the good won't last, not in Moab". They seem to be proved right when Elimelech dies. Naomi however still has her two sons and Moab provides them with wives Orpah and Ruth.

Ten years pass. Is life in Moab good after all? Are they flourishing? Well, one concern is that neither couple appear to have children. They need the next generation to take on the responsibilities of caring for the family when their turn comes. Some will be saying, "Well, what could you expect? We knew life in Moab would not turn out well". Others might say, "It's not Moab. It's those Israelite boys "Sickness" and "Destruction". With names like that life was always going to end badly". And indeed, two more heavy blows land upon the family. The boys, Mahlon and Chilion, both die.

In biblical stories a widow is someone without a husband, sons or even a father-in-law. This story gives us three women who have become widows. Life is going to be tough for them. Their chances of survival are slim.

Naomi decides to return to her home in Bethlehem with her daughters-in-law. She has heard that God has "visited his people and given them bread". This is the first mention of God in the story. It contains hope. It shows confidence that God acts for people and feeds them. The story so far however has challenged that confidence and we wonder what further challenges the rest of the story will bring. There may be more trouble ahead for Naomi and her daughters-in-law as they struggle to survive. We may have to hold on tight to this first hopeful picture of God as we watch their faith being buffeted and them asking themselves whether they can go on having confidence in God.

God bless you,

Tony