

Dear Friends,

RUTH 3: 6-9

Naomi has given Ruth instructions which she hopes will lead to Ruth being matched with Boaz. Ruth, for once, does just what she's told. She goes to the threshing floor where Boaz has been winnowing barley. She keeps herself hidden while, as Naomi predicted, Boaz eats and drinks. After this, again as Naomi predicted, Boaz is cheerful. He's in a good, contented mood. He's ready for rest and sleep. Naomi told Ruth to take good note of where Boaz lies down. She does. It's at the edge of a stack of winnowed barley. Earlier we heard that by chance or perhaps by the hand of God Ruth came to the field of Boaz. Now by chance or perhaps by the hand of God Boaz lies down where there's a bit of privacy. An ideal space for Ruth to put Naomi's plan into action.

Ruth comes quietly. She uncovers Boaz's feet, the lower part of his body. She lies down with him. That's pretty much where Naomi's instructions finished. After that Naomi said, Boaz would tell Ruth what to do.

At midnight, Boaz is startled. He trembles. He shudders with fear and turns over. "And behold a woman was lying at his feet." We noticed earlier that the Hebrew word that the Authorised Version of the Bible translates as "Behold" is a word used when the perspective changes. We've been viewing the story from a distance, through the eyes of an all-seeing narrator. Now instead we see things directly through Boaz's eyes, from his point of view. He's not quite awake. It's dark, he can't really see what's happening. He realises that something is not right. He is not alone. He wakes up quickly with a fright. There's a woman in his bed.

He says, "Who are you?" In the fields he observed the social niceties. To his workers he said, "The Lord be with you." Unsettled in this way, in the middle of the night, he does no such thing. He simply utters a sharp, abrupt, "Who are you?" In Hebrew it is just one word. His question is also in contrast to the one he asked on first seeing Ruth. Then he said, "Whose young woman is this?" To whom does she belong, whose possession is she? Now it is simply "Who are you?"

Did Ruth ever wonder why Naomi told her to wear her finest clothes? It's so dark that Boaz can't see her, let alone what she's wearing. She could have worn anything. Perhaps I'm getting a bit caught up in inconsequential details.

She answers, "I am Ruth, your servant." How will Boaz react to Ruth being in his bed? Israelites like Boaz have sometimes been prejudiced against people from Moab like Ruth. Boaz has shown no signs of that. He has been kind to Ruth. But having her in his bed may be a step too far. He doesn't however, have much time to respond because Ruth has more to say. She has come to the end of Naomi's instructions. From here, she was told, Boaz would tell her what to do. But Ruth has a better idea. Instead, she tells Boaz what to do. She says, "Spread your wing over your servant, for you are a redeeming kinsman."

In the field, Boaz described Ruth as taking shelter "under the wings" of the Lord God of Israel. Now she asks him to be God's representative on earth by taking her under his wing. It's similar to the moment when he blessed her saying "May the Lord reward you." And she responded "May I find favour in your eyes." Ruth really needs Boaz not only to talk about God, but also to put the ways of God into action through practical love and compassion towards her. She needs him to be the human channel through whom God's care is shown. She is saying, "You've asked God to care for me, now you take the responsibility of giving me that care."

In another part of the Bible we hear God saying that he has spread his wing over Jerusalem and covered her nakedness. That is a symbol for God taking Jerusalem as his wife. Ruth is asking Boaz to do the same for her. She can't come right out and say, "Marry me," but she gets as near to that as she possibly can.

She also reminds him of his obligations. She says "You are a redeeming kinsman." He is one of Naomi's nearest relatives. As such he has responsibilities for Naomi and Ruth.

So, here is this woman, who happens to be an immigrant, telling a true born Israelite, a man of worth, a good man, what he should do. Here she is dressed up in her glad rags, the perfume dripping from her lying in his bed with the lower half of his body uncovered. How is he going to react? What is he going to make of such an overture? How will he respond to her advances? Will he be angry and send her away? Will he take what might appear to be an invitation to have sex and then just get rid of her? Will he take her call for help seriously and put the kindness of God that he talks about into action?

God bless you,

Tony