

Dear Friends,

RUTH 4: 1-5

Boaz is sitting at the gate of Bethlehem. That's a public space where justice is administered and business and legal transactions take place. In the next few minutes, Naomi and Ruth's fate will be sealed. A decision will be made about which man will take care of them. Ruth has shown that she can take care of them. But she knows that there are limits to what she can do. These limits aren't from within, they are placed on her from outside, from the society and time in which she lives.

Naomi and Ruth would rather not lodge in overnight shelters for ever. They would like to have a settled place; a home; a quiet place of peace and tranquillity. In their world the best chance of that is with a man. They will soon know which man that will be. They hope it will be Boaz, but custom says that another closer relative must first be given the opportunity to take the responsibility. Boaz is at the gate waiting for that man so that the matter can be settled.

The man appears. He is not given a name. People have taken to just calling him Mr So-and-so. Boaz calls Mr So-and-so to sit down. He does. Boaz calls ten of the town's elders to sit down too. They do. He has a lot of authority. Men do what he tells them to do.

Boaz then tells the man all about a field. And we think, why are they talking about a field? What has this field got to do with anything? Apparently, Naomi is selling the field. She has a field! So, she did not come back to Bethlehem empty after all. She had a field. Why couldn't Ruth work that land instead of gleaning with Boaz? The simplest suggestion is that it was land that had been neglected. It was overgrown. The work that would be needed to get it to a state where it could be cultivated was overwhelming. So, out of desperation Naomi decided to sell it. The money from the sale would keep them going until something else came up.

As the nearest relative Mr So-and-so is first in line for buying or redeeming the field, with Boaz in second place. Boaz invites Mr So-and-so to take this opportunity and buy the field.

Mr So-and-so says "I will redeem it." Yes, he wants to buy the land. This is no surprise. It's in his interests. It's a way of expanding his estate. It's not, however, what we wanted to hear. With the field he will also receive Naomi and Ruth. We wanted Ruth and Boaz to end up together. Now, at the last, it looks as though this man who isn't even given a name is going to get in the way.

Boaz tells him that with the field he will also get Ruth the Moabite, to raise up the name of the dead man. We mentioned earlier that if a man died without having children, his brother had the responsibility of marrying the dead man's wife. The two would then have a child together. And this child would keep alive the name of the brother who died. Actually, Mr So-and-so was not so close a relative as to have

that responsibility. Boaz may be mistaken or he may be misleading them. But no one argues. Boaz has a lot of authority.

This changes everything for Mr So-and-so. He has a lot to think about and he needs to make up his mind quickly. There are disadvantages. He lists them.

1. Does he want a Moabite wife? There is prejudice between Israelites and Moabites, the two are long standing enemies; maybe Mr So-and-so suffers from this prejudice.
2. If he and Ruth had a child, that child would threaten the future prospects of the children he already had.
3. It would be a big responsibility to take on both Naomi and Ruth. That would be two more hungry mouths in the household, a great a demand on the family.
4. Could it be unlucky to marry Ruth? Her first husband died. If he marries her, could he be next?

But, on the plus side. There's the field. And he really would like to have the field.

Mr So-and-so needs to give his answer. There's a crossroads. Go left and the future will be one way, go right and it will be entirely different. In a moment we make these quick decisions. Once we have made them, we do not get another chance. We will have to live with the consequences whatever they may be.

Mr So-and-so thinks while he makes his decision.

Back at their home, Naomi and Ruth are finding it hard to wait patiently. What will their future be? What will happen to them? Which branch of the crossroads will be theirs; along which road will they now travel?

God bless you,

Tony