

Dear Friends,

RUTH 4: 6-13

An unnamed character, who we are calling Mr So-and-so is making his decision. He wants to buy a field that Naomi is selling. But if he buys it, he will also have to take Ruth as his wife, which he does not want to do. What will it be? Deal or no deal?

He makes up his mind. No deal. He refuses to take the land. We would seal the agreement with signatures on a contract or, in the good old days, with the shake of hands. They seal the agreement with the exchange of sandals. One gives his sandal to the other. It's not quite clear who gives and who receives. Let's say as a sign that he has no further interest in the field or in Ruth Mr So-and-so takes off his sandal and hands it over to Boaz.

Then Boaz declares to the ten elders and all the people who have gathered to watch that he has acquired all that belonged to Elimelech, Naomi's husband, and all that belonged to their sons, Mahlon and Chilion. This includes Ruth. Boaz declares that he will take "Ruth the Moabite" to be his wife. That Ruth was from Moab may have put Mr So-and-so off the deal. Boaz, by contrast, has no hesitation in recognising who she is and where she comes from. He totally accepts her, just as she is and he expects the people of Bethlehem to do the same. He says that he is taking Ruth as his wife to maintain the name of her first husband, Mahlon.

It's interesting that at this moment the focus should be on maintaining Mahlon's name. There is suddenly great concern for justice for those who are already dead. By contrast the story up until now has been about people who are alive now trying to get justice for themselves. Naomi has been looking for ways that they can have security and a settled place. Ruth has with a single mind been making sure that there's food on the table for both of them.

Those watching acknowledge that they have witnessed the proceedings. They say "May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel." This group of men honour women from the past. Rachel and Leah were the sisters who were both wives of Jacob. They, along with their servant girls, had the twelve sons who became the heads of the tribes of Israel. They could never have suspected that in years to come they would be looked back on as the ones who built a nation. And Ruth, an immigrant from Moab is placed alongside these mothers of the nation. It puts her in the highest of company.

Boaz and Ruth are married. And the Lord makes her conceive and give birth to a son. This is, on the surface, only the second time that God has acted in the story. The first was when the Lord gave the people food after a time of famine. There have however, been other moments when things have happened and we have wondered if behind them God was guiding the events. So, it says "it chanced that she (Ruth) came upon the part of the field belonging to Boaz." What led her to that particular field? A little bit of luck or the guidance of the hand of God? Or, when

Boaz lay down to sleep on the threshing floor, he "lay down at the edge of the stack of barley." This may have given him and Ruth the privacy they needed for their night time encounter. Why did he choose that spot? Did it just happen that he fell down there, weary from work and a little too much food and drink, or did God prepare a safe space for his children to share a moment of intimacy? Sometimes we feel confident that God has been at work in this or that series of events. At others we simply wonder if God's hand has been the guiding force that has led us to this moment and this place.

The story is pretty much over. But perhaps we can come back one more time, to take a look at the baby.

God bless you,

Tony