

Dear Friends,

RUTH 1: 8-14

Naomi, a widow, is going away from Moab to her original home in Bethlehem. In Bethlehem she will be entitled to some help. There, she is more likely to survive. With her are her two widowed daughters-in-law Orpah and Ruth. As Moabites, they will not be entitled to any help in Bethlehem. There, they are less likely to survive. They are sacrificing all that is familiar and taking on an uncertain and very precarious future.

But wait. Naomi appears to be having second thoughts. She says to her daughters-in-law "Go back". She insists on this. She keeps repeating it. It's possible to read her hesitation in more than one way. Orpah and Ruth will be a help to her, but they will also need a share of her limited resources. In Bethlehem there is some prejudice against Moab. How will people view her for bringing these strangers into their community? On the surface Naomi's words are kind. She talks of her concern for Orpah and Ruth. She hopes that they will find new husbands. She prays for them saying "May the Lord do kindness with you as you have done with the dead and with me".

Orpah and Ruth cry. They seem determined to stay with Naomi. They say, "We will go with you, back to your people". Naomi is trying to be realistic and practical. Her view is that Orpah and Ruth will have a better chance of survival if they have husbands. Although I get the impression that Ruth thinks that with hard work and imagination they could manage, they could get each other through this.

Naomi says that she is too old now to have another husband. Even if she did marry again and have children, would Orpah and Ruth wait for her sons to be of marriageable age? Naomi has in mind the custom of Levirate Marriage which is commanded in the Bible. According to this, if a man dies without having children, his brother must marry his widow. Children born from this union will be counted as continuing the name and line of the dead man. Hold on to this custom. We will need it again later.

Naomi has urged Orpah and Ruth to go back and return to Moab. She draws to a close with her feelings about life and God. She says, "It has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me". To be fair, life has been tough on Orpah and Ruth too. Maybe Naomi could be a little more aware of that. She feels however that what God has given her has been famine and loss; loss of home and loved ones. Far from being held safely in God's palm. She feels as though God's hand has been raised against her.

They cry some more. Orpah kisses her mother-in-law, turns around and goes back to Moab. She obeys Naomi's instructions as is expected of a dutiful daughter-in-law. Naomi turns to Ruth and looks to see what she will do.

God bless you,

Tony