The Book of Ruth – session 1

**First Thoughts**

‘In the Blitz’, ‘in the 60s’, ‘in the Thatcher years’ conjure up a host of associations in British minds. And the phrase that opens the book of Ruth would have done likewise for its original readers – ‘in the days when the judges ruled’. Yes, the book of Ruth has sometimes been read as if it were a romantic country idyll, an Iron Age boy-meets-girl-from-the-wrong-side-of-the-tracks rom-com – *When Bozie met Ruthie* – but that notion is exploded by those opening words.

‘The days when the judges ruled’ was an era of radical moral and spiritual decline. Time and again Israel rebel against God. Divine discipline follows until the people repent and cry for help. The pattern repeats – round and down like a vortex spiralling into darkness. Though we can’t be certain, the events in Ruth seem to occur after Gideon and before the time when civil war breaks out after a priest’s concubine is gang-raped to death by a group of Benjaminites. At the same time, the mention of the judges reminds the reader of God’s mercy and many interventions.

Like Ruth, we don’t get to choose the times we’re born in and how they make the joys and jolts of life easier or harder to respond to. Currently there is an invasion in Ukraine, and violent conflicts in many part of the world. In Europe we are facing an energy crisis as a result, whilst in other parts of the world there is a food crisis, impacting the poorest most heavily. How do we respond in godly ways to hardship, suffering, loss – financial, relational, physical, mental? Our own? And other people’s?

**Read Ruth 1**

**Focus on the Theme**

1. Think of a time when you or someone close to you faced hardship, suffering or loss. How did you see God at work through that time?

**Of Moab and Moabites**

The Moabites were the descendants of Abraham’s nephew Lot through an incestuous union with Lot’s daughter (Genesis 19:30-38). They became idol worshippers , and Israelite relations with them over the centuries had been fraught. When the people of Israel left Egypt and made their way to Canaan, the Moabites did not offer them bread and water, and their king tried to have them cursed (Numbers 24:17). Later, at Shittim, a large number of Israelite men had sex with Moabite women and worshipped their gods, leading to the plague that killed 24,000 Israelites (Numbers 25:1-9).

**What does the Bible say?**

1. Why does Naomi release, and discourage, her daughters-in-law from coming with her to Bethlehem (1:8-13)?
2. As a Moabite widow, what is Ruth risking by choosing to live in an Israelite community?
3. What do Ruth’s decision and her words of commitment (1:16-17) reveal about her character and her priorities?

And what does Ruth’s decision suggest about Naomi’s witness to her over the years?

1. What do Naomi’s words in Moab (1:8-15) and on arriving in Bethlehem (1:20-21) reveal about her character and her emotional and spiritual state?

**Levirate Marriage**

When Naomi tells Orpah and Ruth that she is too old to have another son to become one of their husbands, she is referring to the law of levirate marriage (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). If a man dies without an heir then his brother has an obligation to marry his widow to ensure there is a child to carry on the dead man’s name. This is still practised in a number of countries today. In contexts where there is no welfare state and no possibility of saving for the equivalent of a pension, the practice not only preserves the name of the deceased but, vitally, ensures that the widow has a child to provide for her in old age.

**Going Deeper**

1. Famines occur frequently in the Old Testament. Sometimes it’s clear God is using them to discipline his people ( Deuteronomy 32:18-24; Judges 6:1-6; 2 Samuel 21:1), sometimes they just happen (Genesis 12:1). Compare how, in response to famine, Abraham decides to go down to Egypt (Genesis 12:10) with how his grandson Jacob does (Genesis 45:27-46:4). How might this background help us discern how we are to view Elimelek’s decision to move to Moab (1:1)?
2. Naomi and Elimelek move to Moab to find food and their sons marry Moabite women. How might the history of Israel’s relations with Moab help us discern whether God might have approved or disapproved of these decisions?

**Living it Out**

1. Is there a godly character quality you’ve noticed in Ruth or Naomi that you’d like to grow in?
2. ‘In the days when the judges ruled’ (1:1) gives the reader an indication of Israel’s culture at the time. How would you describe the culture of your frontline (a place you regularly spend time with people who don’t know Jesus)?

What is positive?

What is challenging?

1. Is there someone you know to be in crisis?

How might you come alongside them?