The Book of Ruth – session 2

**First Thoughts**

When the going gets tough, the tough, the saying goes, get going. Sometimes the only thing to do in tough times is *something*, even if that something is unlikely to solve the big problem. Ruth and Naomi have nothing to eat. Without land, without apparent support from the Bethlehem community, Ruth, as we’ll read, takes the only step open to her. And it’s a step down economically and socially from being a daughter in her mother’s house in her own country. She goes out looking for a field to glean in. She’s proactive.

Of course, sometimes – or usually, for some of us – the going isn’t tough, the going is fine. Or at least pretty good, so good that we perhaps don’t notice that new person at the club, that new mum at the school gate, that new intern in IT. Or perhaps we have stopped noticing that long-standing member at the club that not many people talk to, that mum with worn-out shoes who always scuttles away with her head down, that middle manager who always eats lunch alone. We’re fine. We don’t need a new friend, or an awkward friend. We’re fine. We don’t need to be proactive. For our own sake, at least…

**Read Ruth 2**

**Focus on the Theme**

1. Think about you are a Christian – where you spend time in an ordinary week. In what ways do you currently seek the wellbeing of that place and the people there?

**Picking up on gleaning**

God instituted several laws to ensure that the poor, whether Israelite or resident aliens, would not starve, and could contribute to feeding themselves. With that in mind, he instructed farmers not to harvest right up to the edge of their fields, nor to go over a vineyard a second time (Leviticus 19:9), nor to pick up the grains that fell from stalks as they were being harvested. Rather, they were to leave them for the poor to glean (Leviticus 23:22). Gleaning was back-breaking work, but a steady worker might pick up a litre or more of grain a day.

**What Does the Bible Say?**

1. What significance do you see in the phrases ‘As it turned out’ (2:3) and ‘Just then Boaz arrived’ (2:4)?
2. What can we learn about Ruth’s character from her actions and words in this chapter (for example: 2:2, 10, 13, 17-18)?
3. List the things that Boaz does for Ruth (for example: 2:8-9, 11-12, 14, 15-16). In what ways does Boaz go above and beyond what the law of gleaning required?
4. Boaz is not expecting Ruth to come to his field, so he’s not had time to prepare. What do his actions and words reveal about his character and about the culture of the time? What are the reasons for the actions he takes? See 2:11.

**A word about a word**

In Ruth 2:1, Boaz is described as ‘a man of standing’. In other translations it’s ‘a man of renown’, ‘of noble character’, of ‘valour’. The Hebrew word is *chail* and is most frequently applied to soldiers – David’s mighty men of *chail* (1 Chronicles 28:1). As such, it has connotations of heroism, but essentially it’s a word about character, and it’s a high accolade. Boaz uses it to describe Ruth (3:11), and those at the city gate pray that Boaz would be a doer of *chail* (4:11). Biblical heroism is not just manifested in war but in godly character and action in ordinary life.

Importantly, it sums up the woman of ‘noble character’ in Proverbs 31:10, whose fear of the Lord is expressed in generous, wise living in everything from household management to international trading, from childcare to care for the poor. If Proverbs shows us *chail* expressed in an exemplary way in an upper-class, wealthy woman, the book of Ruth reveals what it looks like in a poor immigrant widow and a moderately well-to-do farmer.

**Going Deeper**

1. The passage describes Ruth’s first day at work in Bethlehem. What do we learn about her from the way she works? See 2:2-3, 7, 17-18.
2. Ann ephah (2:17) is 22 litres, roughly 297,968 grains of barley. How might the harvesters’ participation in being generous have changed their attitudes to Ruth and Boaz?

**The guardian-redeemer**

The land allocated to a family during the distribution of territory under Moses and Joshua was intended to be held by that family in perpetuity. In an agricultural economy, land was critical to economic prosperity, and it was God’s intention that no family should be subjected to multi-generational poverty. However, if, for economic reasons, the family needed to sell the land, the new owner was obliged to return it to the original owners in the year of Jubilee, or to sell it to a relative of the original family if they were seeking to buy it back (redeem it) on behalf of the original family. Indeed, it was the clearly designated responsibility of the closest relative of the impoverished family

-the guardian-redeemer

-to do so (see Leviticus 25? Particularly 25:25-28).

**Living it Out**

1. Boaz takes several actions to bless Ruth. He prays, praises, protects, even changes the way work is done in his field. Thinking about where you are – work, club, school gate or elsewhere – what might you do to contribute to making it a better place for people to flourish?
2. Women have been oppressed in societies throughout history. What have you noticed in your context?

If you are a woman, what do you experience?

How might you respond, whatever your gender, in however small a way?

1. Boaz affirms Ruth for her kindness to Naomi. Is there someone you know who needs your kindness right now?

What will you do?