**Where to from here? October 31st 2021 Ruth 1:1-18**

For many months we have not been able to travel. Travelling is a favourite pastime for many of us. New adventures, returning to favourite places, catching up with old friends. However travelling comes with its own hazards, the restrictions we have lived with have been to minimise hazards to our own and other people’s wellbeing. In 1987 I travelled to the UK alone for the second time in my life. I felt quite comfortable travelling alone, I often did this. During one leg of my journey I was using a rail/drive option. However, one night I arrived by train at Windermere in the Lakes district ready to pick up a hire car to drive to my overnight accommodation. I was quite shocked to find that there was no sign of the hire car or even of a process to locate where the car was. After clamouring through travel documents I eventually found a contact number for the company and was greeted by a very grumpy employee. I explained the situation and was informed that I should have been informed that the car hire service in that area only operated for limited hours each day. I suddenly felt very vulnerable, I was a single woman in an unknown town, booked into accommodation well out of town, with my only contact being a grumpy employee who was not initially inclined to help me. Reluctantly he came and delivered a car to me and I was able to get on my way again.

Our story over the past two years has been characterised by unexpected interruptions, hazards, signs of hope, discouragement, new procedures, restrictions, new practices, isolation, and simultaneously the normal processes of life, births, deaths, the occasional marriage, milestone birthdays and anniversaries, but most of them significantly effected by the circumstances under which we have been living.

We like Ruth and Naomi are at another new and interesting part in our journey. It is a good time to give some intentional thought to the path we have travelled, what we have learnt and to what we want to take into the future.

This story of Ruth and Naomi has been a popular story often first encountered in childhood. It is a story that needs to be considered in the context of its own time. The story describes its chronological setting as being in the time of the Judges. This was a turbulent and violent time, wise leadership was scarce for much of this era. The book of Judges concludes that “In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

The story is marked by a variety of decisions which inevitably alter the course of the character’s lives. These turning points are emphasised in the narrative by the repeated use of the Hebrew word “*sab”* which is variously translated “turn”, “return” or “turn back”.[[2]](#footnote-2) This concept involves far more than the turns involved in a physical journey, it encompasses embracing a new social orientation, engaging with a new community.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The story begins with the first of these turning points when, in a time of famine, Elimelech and his family make the bold decision to leave their homeland to seek food in hostile foreign territory, a palce which Israelites shunned. They came from Bethlehem, which meant “the house of bread” in desperation for their basic food needs. It appears that the famine was lengthy, they stayed in Moab ten years and in that time the sons took Moabite wives, but no children resulted from these marriages.

Naomi becomes the central figure of the story at this point. She had survived the famine, but she was separated from her wider family, and suffered the death of her husband and then her two sons. Naomi believes that God has turned away from her, abandoned her and her remaining family. These were desperate times and Naomi could only see one way forward for herself. She decided to return to Bethlehem, having heard that the famine had ended. God’s loving kindness towards her people had become apparent once again. However, she still expresses passionately her deep feelings of being abandoned by God.[[4]](#footnote-4) Like Job her losses had been compounding and her future looked grim. She expressed a sense of helplessness towards her remaining family members, their future security and needs. Naomi’s struggle to understand where is God in the midst of all this calamity, is there plainly for us to observe.

Though Naomi expresses appreciation of Ruth and Orpah’s support, she comes to another turning point. She encourages them to turn back from accompanying her any longer, and to return to their parent’s homes, in the hope of building a new life. There is clearly affection between these three women as they weep at the prospect of parting, they face challenging choices with no simple solutions. Orpah accepts this turning point and returns to her family of origin. There is no indication that this was an unreasonable decision. When faced with similar circumstances people may choose different and equally valid pathways forward. (We have found this during the pandemic and we will continue to find it as we move on).

Ruth’s choice becomes another turning point. She affirms that she has already embraced Naomi’s people and faith, she came to this turning point through her marriage. Now she pleads with Naomi that she may go with her, and in the process makes a permanent commitment to share fully in Naomi’s life. There is an element of indignation in Ruth’s response, she passionately does not want to turn away from her primary allegiance to Naomi, her loyalty is firmly embedded with Naomi and she cannot entertain abandoning that commitment. Ruth makes a “lengthy, forceful, impassioned speech that dismisses all of Naomi’s arguments as irrelevant.”[[5]](#footnote-5) There were no guarantees that Ruth would be accepted by the people of Bethlehem, she was a Moabite, her decision involved significant risk.

The commitment to even be buried where Naomi is buried is particularly noteworthy, as being buried in one’s homeland was deeply prised by people in this era.[[6]](#footnote-6) There was no expectation that Ruth had any legal or customary obligation towards her mother-in-law. So her acts are “understood as an act of *hesed,* showing love and loyalty over and beyond what is considered normal and expected.”[[7]](#footnote-7) This love and loyalty mirrored the love and loyalty of God towards Israel. The same word *hesed* is used frequently of God’s loving kindness towards God’s people. It is also used by Naomi when she prays a blessing upon Orpah and Ruth as she encouraged them to go back to their homes.[[8]](#footnote-8) She desired that they would be recipients of God’s loving kindness in their own land. Naomi cannot act on their behalf, so she commits them to God’s loving kindness.

Ruth clings to Naomi. The passion in this narrative touches our hearts. At a time in our lives where physical contact with others has been limited it seems to speak all the more profoundly to the needs of our hearts. It can prompt us to consider what do we cling to? Whom do we cling to? This pandemic has highlighted those things which are most precious to us. So as we go forward how will we honour that which is precious to us?

Ruth challenges us to consider what should we forsake? What changes would we like to make? What things should we turn away from? What should we turn towards? What should we passionately embrace?

Orpah reminds us to consider what things do we want to reclaim from our past? What things have an enduring value? What should we return to?

Naomi reminds us, that struggling to make sense of where God is in the midst of calamity is very reasonable. She also encourages us to see, even in glimmers, that God’s loving kindness endures. The chapter concludes by affirming that it was the time of the barley harvest when they arrived in Bethlehem. A new beginning. A time of hope.

Where do we see the loving kindness of God? How are we expressing that in relationship to others, particularly those in need?

In returning how do we guard against losing that which has been redefined during the intervening time?

1. Judges 21:25 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Kathleen A. Robertson Farmer, “Ruth: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections” in Leander E. Keck, et al Ed. *The New Interpreters Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes,* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press,1998) 899 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, *Ruth: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching,* (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 2012) 49 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ruth 1:13, 20-21 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Robertson Farmer, “Ruth: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections” 905 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Robertson Farmer, “Ruth: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections” 907 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Robertson Farmer, “Ruth: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections” 908 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Doob Sakenfeld, *Ruth: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching,* 46 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)