

Pentecost 23 B. 8th November, 2009
The Journey of Naomi

The story of Ruth is one of those Hebrew Scripture stories familiar, at least in part, to most of us. Best known are those lines of beautiful, poetic faithfulness from Ruth to her mother-in-law, Naomi “where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God, my God...”. It’s also a story that turns from tragedy and hardship to a happy and far-reaching ending, which is the part of the story we read today.

This is a story that begins with profound loss. Naomi – a Jew living in the Gentile land of Moab -is widowed; her sons die, leaving their widows Ruth and Orpah, both non-Jewish women of Moab. Three women left with three dead husbands, no sons, and no means of support. This is tragedy of the worst sort for a woman in those times. Naomi – a foreigner, a Hebrew women in a heathen country, a long way from her home land and only herself to depend upon. She turns to do about the only thing she can – turning back towards her home land and her God, Naomi, accompanied by Ruth, embarks on a journey. This journey will be many things – geographical, emotional, spiritual; all mixed up together. It is also a journey through grief, a journey that will move her towards healing and wholeness.

The story of Naomi speaks to all of us whose lives have been torn apart by loss. Though bound into the culture of those ancient times, Naomi’s journey at its heart is not all that different from what we too experience in our loss and grief. Like Naomi, we seek that place – that homeland – where we can find restoration and hope and find our place of belonging in what has become an alien and unhappy landscape.

Times of great loss force us to draw on deeply lodged internal resources. After the first flush of consolation and support from wider family and friends, we’re left ultimately with ourselves. The battle wages on two fronts: not only - how will I deal with the absence of this person and the huge losses and life changes surrounding this, but how will I cope with this relentless grief that seems to have an unpredictable and unyielding life of its own? Life as it has been seems to fall apart. Frightening and painful questions struggle to surface: “am I going to survive this?” At the centre of our distress is the unravelling of old certainties. Is God still dependable? Is he even there?

Naomi, in the greyness of loss, does what so many of us do, even those of us who have accepted God as an integral part of our lives. She looks to God with ambivalence. God is ingrained into her being; on the one hand, she prays that God will deal kindly with her daughters-in-law, but on the other, filled with bitter grief, she feels by-passed by God. Her words: “The hand of the Lord has turned against me” (1:13). She looks into herself and sees only emptiness. She asks to be called Mara – bitter- because the Lord has dealt bitterly, harshly, with her; once she was full, now she is empty. In the loss of her identity as wife and

mother, she can no longer even own what has been her name – Naomi, a name meaning “pleasant”.

The pathos of Naomi’s grief is palpable. It’s as if she is turning aside from life, completely swallowed up by her grief.

Yet her movement is towards health – despite her profound sorrow, she reaches inside herself to the core of her identity and moves to regain that core. She is a Judean and a Hebrew, a believer in the one true God and belonging with her people. For whatever else she does not have, she has God and the possibility of his loving kindness in her life. God provides her with the gift of the loyalty and companionship of Ruth; a gift which in those early stages of this journey is not enough to allay the bitterness of her grief. Neither is the physical movement away from Moab and its dead enough. For Naomi, as for all of us, relocation can never substitute for the work of grief. The real work of grief has to be waged within.

We begin to see little shoots of hope surfacing. Naomi’s journey now does turn within: in the process of reaching inside, into the core of her being, albeit torn apart by bitterness, Naomi is engaging in the process of redefining who she is. At this point, she is shaping her identity –giving herself a new name – based on her feelings, her experience of the deepest anguish and loss. But this constitutes movement in her journey of grief; she is no longer numb, she’s able to feel, able to name what is happening to her. There’s power and hope in this. When we are able to name something, we begin to have power over it. Identifying our grief, or any gripping emotion, naming it and owning it as part of the reality of our life is a huge and life giving step.

For 8am:

In the grieving process, we are often frightened by our strong and even uncontrollable feelings of anger, bitterness, distress, rage – against others, against ourselves, against God. We tell ourselves this is wrong; we shouldn’t feel that way. But it’s a necessary part of the healing; it’s that part of the reaching deep within where our rawest emotions spend themselves and somehow, God is found in those depths. *[leave this out at 8am - It’s like we need to spew out all the lost hopes and dreams and prayers so that in our brokenness and emptiness we can actually become aware of God’s presence in us, in ways that are difficult – perhaps impossible - to know in those times when our lives are full. There’s great hope in this – God will meet us in our need; the reality of God will break through in ways we may never have experienced before.]*

Christian writer Joan Chittister puts it this way: “Left without the security of the past, we are forced to stand alone, to find in ourselves the steel of spirit it takes to survive the unbearable, to trust that the God who made us for life stands by, even at what feels like the boundaries of death”.

Despite her sorrow and her emptiness, Naomi presses on, returning to Bethlehem with Ruth. With skilful manoeuvring, she secures a future for Ruth as the wife of her kinsman Boaz, and a future for herself. We don't hear anymore of her grief. The story, in fact, as it ends, turns from darkness and void to images of new life: the birth of a son to Ruth.

What we can glean for ourselves is hope: the story of a resurrecting God, birthing the new out of a pain-filled place. There are echoes here of creation itself: God speaks into the dark, formless void, and light and life begin. There is the resonation of an alive Jesus bursting from death. There is the hope and promise that even in our inability to see past the shadow, in the long dark nights of the soul, God is still at work, drawing us to light and life. This creating God comes again to us in new ways so that we may live: not merely exist, but **live**.

This is a God of new beginnings; of creation, resurrection, and hope.

This story of widows who have no living children becomes a story of new beginnings and birth. And the birth of this baby, grandfather to the greatest king in the history of Israel, represents hope for the future, not just for this old woman and her daughter-in-law, but for all Israel itself. And for us, Ruth the Gentile outsider, becomes the great, great, great –many times great – grandmother of Jesus.

But it's in Naomi's courage to press on through her grief; to face the unknown and to turn towards her God, that we see the creating and re-creating power of God able to work in her and in us.

And this story becomes a gift to us, as we, too, find ourselves in it, and find that same hope in God.