

Background to the reading

On this first Sunday of the year I would like to focus on the journey of the great, great, great, great grandmother of Jesus namely Ruth.

The story of Ruth is one of love that would one day resonate well with the whole coming of Christ to the world. But is also a story of her journey with surprises and unexpected miracles.

Let me start at the beginning. There was a family living in Bethlehem. Bethlehem actually means "house of bread". But the irony was that this "house of bread" had no bread left. So the head of the family Elimelech left the land of his forefathers Judah to go to Moab to the land of the enemy with his wife Naomi, two sons Mahlon and Kilion. Elimelech's name means "God is king".

In Moab Elimelech died. His two sons eventually married Moabite women Ruth and Orpah. This is remarkable in the sense that they only married these Gentile women after their father has died. Why? Well I can only assume that because he was a typical Jewish Patriarch, he would not have allowed his sons to marry Gentile women. In Deuteronomy 7 God clearly told his people not to marry foreign women or men. The Jews despised all gentiles and even called them "dogs".

After Mahlon and Kilion died Naomi was left on her own with only the two Gentile women. Naomi then heard that there was plenty food again in her native land Judah and thought that it was time to return to her home country and home village. But she knew her situation was desperate. She could only hope that some family member will take care of her because if you did not have a husband or sons to take care of you, you had no future at all. You were at the grace of family members to help you or to send you away!

Naomi knew this pretty well and said to her new in laws to return to their fathers so that they at least could be cared for. Naomi also was most probably afraid of the reaction of her people towards her Gentile daughter in laws. After all, the Moabites were the enemies of Judah.

So Naomi did everything possible to deter them to come with her. But after three times, **Ruth refused to go while** Orpah left with a heavy heart.

Ruth said to her mother in law that she will stay with her and journey through life with her. She is no longer a Gentile but a Jewish woman. She will serve the Almighty God the Maker of heaven and earth. And she will die and be buried in the same place as her mother in law. She finished her words with a promise to God confessing that He can punish her if she does not remain faithful to her mother in law!

To us this may only sound like words but actually it is insightful words with extraordinary value and depth with life-changing consequences. Ruth became the first example of a Jewish convert in the history of Judaism. Later Judaism used her action into a Jewish convert formula whereby all Gentile women who wanted to become Jewish would be tested three times if they are really serious in their intention to become Jewish.

MP 469

My faith looks up to Thee

Sermon

The text verse 16 But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God."

Ruth literally gave up her whole existence, her culture, her people and future going with her mother in law. She chose and committed to stay with her mother in law no matter what. She had all the reasons in the world to walk away. She was not from Judah, and she had no blood responsibility to her mother in law. She could have just stayed in her own country.

After the third time that her mother in law is sending her away, Ruth said that she is determined to go with Naomi. Yes she insisted that she will not let her mother in law go without her.

Despite the predicament they were in, she did not allow their personal circumstances to ruin their lives. In the end Ruth gave Naomi a future by marrying a blood relative of the family Boaz and changed their destiny through the birth of a son Obed the grandfather of king David!

Ruth made a choice to love and a commitment to make it work despite all the consequences, regardless of all the sacrifices she had to make.

What does the story of Ruth mean to us?

Every new year we find ourselves making promises that we sometimes fail to keep. Through Ruth's example we can learn valuable lessons. The first being not to make promises just for the sake of promises. The second being that every promise and every action has a consequence and if we are not committed to follow it through, it will be doomed. The third being that instead of playing being a victim to see the opportunity of new beginnings. The fourth being that once we are committed to follow God, all the things that we worry about will fall into place. Ruth trusted the Almighty God and became a power instrument in his hand.

Maybe we must follow in the footsteps of Ruth in the beginning of this New Year. We can so easily become victims of our society - Christian victims, to scared to speak about our faith in public, to easily manipulated to believe that there is no God longer on this earth.

We currently live in a time where it is all doom and gloom. Every day we hear about the financial problems of the world. We read about it in the newspapers. In our own country, we are aware

that more people suffer under financial and social burdens. And to top it all, we are facing a referendum where we will have to decide whether we stay in the United Kingdom or become an independent country.

To bring it into our context: all this external and internal circumstances can influence us to doubt our faith in the existence of God and His presence among us. It can make us negative and depressed.

All the external problems of this world and our own personal calamities can cause us to give up our church activities, our lives of prayer and coming to worship. It can subdue the joy of knowing that our Savior is born. It can dampen the hope that Jesus Christ overpowered death and gave us all a new life.

But we cannot allow this to happen - And this where Ruth can teach us some lessons on how to handle our circumstances, even if they are hard and difficult to handle.

It reminds me of an amazing story of a daughter that complained to her mother about the hardships of life and how hopeless she feels. After her mother listened to her she took her to the kitchen. She then said: I am going to show you something. She took three pots and poured some water in them. In the first pot she put in a carrot, in the second an egg and the third coffee powder. She cooked it for 20 minutes and then said to her daughter: "Now come and see this. The hot water is all the suffering we have to endure. To some, it makes them soft and more vulnerable just like a carrot. It changes their outside from being hard to being soft. Other people are like the egg: suffering and hardship make them hard and bitter on the outside, unable to show their softer inner self. Others do not allow to be changed by circumstances of suffering. Instead they change their suffering and hardships for the better just like the coffee powder changes the taste, smell and texture of the hot boiling water!"

Ruth was like the coffee powder. She did not allow her poor circumstances to overpower her! She had faith in the Lord God and was a vehicle in his Mighty hand.

We too can be like the coffee powder in hot boiling water. Instead of climbing on the bandwagon of doom and gloom, we can rejoice because we are not waiting in vain to be with our Lord and Saviour. He did come to save us, and change our circumstances for ever and ever. He made it possible for you and me to overcome hardship, suffering and pain through the presence of His Holy Spirit in our lives. We do not have to feel as if we are drowning. We do not have to feel hopeless. We belong to our Lord Jesus Christ in life and death. We have nothing to fear.

Our solution is to keep our faith. And the only way to keep our faith is to read our Bibles more than we read our newspapers, to hear more sermons than the news bulletins on our tellies, to speak to God more than we speak to other people of what is going on in the world!

A new year with many opportunities await us. Let do as the latin poet Horace once said: Carpe diem! Which means translated, "seize the day"

Amen