

Sermon preached in St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney 1.11.2015 by Rev Ross Smith. Lectionary: Ruth 1:1-18; Psalm 146; Hebrews 9:11-14; Mark 12:28-34.

### Ordinary People

We come into being through families. Families sometimes have rough times. All of us have many stories about our nuclear and extended families. Some parts of our stories are painful to remember. Yet sometimes there are surprising, unexpected outcomes despite troublesome beginnings.

Today we have a family story from the time of the Judges in Israel, a time when, according to the author, “*Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.*” A time of terrible famine and unattached, unprotected, extremely vulnerable people. Two were aliens, who had to make their way amongst strangers in a difficult world. A novella about three widows - Ruth, sister Orpah, and their mother-in-law, Naomi, and their journey.

It's a true story, because it is about a family in trouble. A father dies, then his two sons, and there are three women, beset by problems and tensions, but linked in misery. We know about tensions between mothers-in-law and son's wives and between parents and children. A modern scenario.

There may be some families, perhaps yours is one of them, that don't have any problems, but that would make them very unusual. But Ruth's story is about a fairly usual family, one where it is hard going just to keep living and trying to learn to love one another.

Some family members have complicated balancing acts to perform, when parent have separated and have remarried. On special occasions such as birthdays, weddings, and funerals, a balance of time and attention is required. I conducted a memorial service. Friends and relatives occupied different sides of the church and had separate wakes. I had to balance my time between the two groups.

Ruth's story is set in the time of the Judges where “*Everyone did what is right in his own eyes*”: moral collapse, no effective government, violence in the streets and in the homes, political intrigue, corruption everywhere. A tough time for marriage and children, hard to be a family.

Economic hardship was present too, in the form of “*famine in the land.*” (In our world, we have Global Financial Crises.) Children starving, old people dying in the streets, and people committing crimes because they couldn't find work. Not an attractive society.

Naomi and husband, in desperation, leave home in Bethlehem and go to the wild of Moab, hoping things are better there. But Moab is a tough place. Not one of first choice, unless one is desperate.

Back in Genesis, after Abraham and Lot parted company, Lot went to live in a cave in Moab with his two daughters. His wife was a pillar of salt by then. The aged, single father had to manage two daughters, who realised their time was running out because no husbands were available.

They solved the problem by getting Lot drunk and then taking advantage of him. The result, nine months later, was two sons. One of these was named Moab, who became “*the father of the Moabites.*”(Genesis 20:37). Not an uplifting family story.

One would have to be desperate, to go to live in the land of the Moabites, but that is what Naomi and husband and two sons did. Father died soon after arrival, so Naomi had to bring up her sons, without husband's help. She tried her best with them. To Naomi's dismay they soon became infatuated with Moabite women, foreigners. No husband to help deal with this problem.

Naomi tries to reason with Mahlon: “*It's not that what's her name is a bad girl...*” but Mahlon says, “*Her name is Ruth, Mother...*” Naomi goes on: “*Alright, Ruth is not a bad girl but she's not had the upbringing and advantages that you've had, and her people don't have the same values as us. She's just not up to what we would want in a daughter-in-law. Mahlon interrupts the flow:“What you are saying, Mother, is that she just a Moabite, not one of us. Not good enough.”*”

Naomi gets as far as you and I would get, in trying to counsel our offspring about choices and preferences. In any case, realistically, can you expect to find a nice, polite, synagogue-going girl in the wilds of Moab? It's not long before Naomi finds herself with two Moabite daughters-in-law.

It's tough being a mother-in-law. You critique the daughter-in-laws for their choice of clothes, the cosmetics used, cooking style and make constructive suggestions, but you get no thanks. Also, the mother-in-law gets critiqued for her sons' bad manners and behaviour. Not a happy family.

It all changes when the two husbands die. Now Naomi is left with these two daughters-in-law whom she has struggled to get to know and handle. Naomi realises that she must return to Bethlehem, where she still has relatives, and try to make her way without prospect of finding a husband, little chance of finding suitable income from hand-craft or labouring work, reliant to a greater or less degree of the goodwill of her the community.

Naomi, a widow, counsels the other widows, saying "Go back to your own people. I can't help you." But the women say, surprisingly, "No, you are, now, our people. We will go with you." They will not let Naomi keep on saying there is no future for Moabite women in Bethlehem; that they would be better off staying in Moab.

However, Orpah left, but Ruth clung to Naomi, just as a husband is to cling to his wife, so that they become one flesh. Even though Naomi could not produce another son for Ruth.

Ruth makes her impassioned speech, "Where you go, I will go...your people shall be my people and your God my God; where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried."

It's a story about strange connections, unusual linkages that occur in an ordinary family.

We have trouble in understanding this story because we are more individualistic in modern society. We are not so open to the type of bonding shown between Ruth and Naomi. Yet, nevertheless, we often feel anything but free. For we are concerned about the opinions of our peers; we isolate our older people, and, in some cases, rarely visit them in their enclosed communities. Marriage is sometimes just a contract between two friendly strangers to satisfy individual needs.

Ruth's story is a different story; about venturing forth without any guarantees about the future, with only the confidence that the future will be more bearable when we bear it with another.

You know the rest of the story. About Ruth finding and securing a man to be husband, and bearing a son in Bethlehem. Despite all the odds, vulnerable, alone and determined. Her son, Obed, became the father of Jesse, who became father of David, an ancestor of Joseph, a carpenter who became father of another baby boy born in Bethlehem, named Jesus (*Joshua*, meaning "God will save").

A strange story: Ruth, a Moabite woman, becomes the means of salvation for a people in and beyond Israel, for we are included in the whole human family for which Jesus came, suffered, died and rose, to bring to a new future, a world and families in need of new life.

It is a story about ordinary people who are, despite appearances to the contrary, saints. Saints are people, like you and me, whom God can use, in our families, congregation, work and leisure families and international families, to make a difference in troubled times in a troubled world.

Like Naomi and Ruth we can stick together through thick and thin. In *Revelation 21:5-6* are these words: "I am making everything new...I will freely give water from the life-giving fountain to everyone who is thirsty."

We can trust God to use our fidelity to one another to bless the world. Because God's extraordinary love brings new worlds, new futures, out of seemingly impossible families, congregations and situations. They saw, we see, "a new heaven and as new earth." (*21:1*)