

Welcome, good morning to our new way of being church together.

Let's pray

May the words of my mouth and on the page, and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you, our God. Amen

We are living in interesting times, changing times, times of great turmoil and uncertainty. And yet through all this it is good to keep some kind of normality, some kind of familiar rhythm.

So, yes, today is Mothering Sunday, a day to celebrate important women in our lives. And what better way to do that, than finishing off our sermon series on the book of Ruth.

If you want to follow it in your Bibles, we're looking at the final chapter of Ruth. Ruth chapter 4
Later in the talk we will also be looking at the first few verses from Matthew chapter 1 – so you may like to put a marker in there too.

A book full of love and honour and respect. We see the deep love Ruth has for Naomi, her mother-in-law. So much so that Ruth left her country of Moab and moved to Bethlehem where she was gossiped about as being the outsider, the foreigner, the hated Moabite.

It was not easy for Ruth, She was fully aware of the history and the hatred between the two nations of Moab and Israel, and chose, not only to follow her mother-in-law, but also to follow Naomi's God, Yahweh.

It was not easy for Naomi either. Poor Naomi had expected to die alone, she'd lost her husband and two sons and there were no more sons - so their family line was about to die out in Israel. No wonder she was sad and bitter. She expected to die a pauper's death, ignored by any guardian-redeemer. After all, who would jeopardize their own estate to help a washed-up old widow and a foreign migrant worker?

But through a series of God-incidences, things began to look up for our two women.

Last week we heard about Naomi, the match-making mother-in-law, setting up Ruth and Boaz and the blossoming of love between these two younger people.

Could this be the answer to Naomi's problems? A kinsman redeemer who could keep the family line of her dead husband alive?

Could this be the answer for Boaz? As an unmarried man in his forties, he must have looked around at all his married friends and wondered whether the Lord would leave him on the shelf forever. But now he had met and fallen in love with Ruth.

And how exciting for Ruth to, to be accepted into the Jewish world, and have someone to protect and provide for her and her mother-in-law. Someone I think she rather fancied too.

But at the end of Chapter 3 - we were left with a cliff hanger....
There was another man who was first in line, ahead of Boaz.

He had first rights for the land that belonged to Naomi, which was almost certainly mortgagedso the redeemer would be expected to buy the land....but it was more complicated than that....if the redeemer bought the land, with that came any wives of previous owners....In other words any redeemer who bought Naomi's land would have to take Ruth as their wife too....which is not what Boaz wished for.

So, Boaz goes and he negotiates - he does business - where it was traditional to do business - at the city gate.

And Boaz, well he was quite a businessman. He initially withholds the information about Ruth. The other guardian redeemer was quite happy to buy the land.... always good to have extra land. But once Boaz drops in that Ruth comes with the land he quickly declines.

Why was this? Well there's that double whammy - not only does he have to spend our money for the cost of the field, but also by taking Ruth, which he would have been obliged to do, if Ruth then had a son, the land would belong to the family of Elimelek and not our nameless redeemer. Then there's the thing about any children of a Moabite would be excluded from the tabernacle for 10 generations, excluded from worshipping God. It was just too much, too complicated....

And we think family lives today can get complicated!

So the first in line declines and Boaz gets his wife and the land.... And he does this for love....

The transaction is sealed by the ancient custom of the sharing of a sandal in front of witnesses, in front of the elders of the town.

Boaz confirms that he understands that the property remains in the line of Elimelek. More than that any son born to him would not carry **his** lineage, but Elimelek's. And any sons born to Ruth would also be shunned. That's quite a sacrifice he's making for love.

Ruth too had another fear. She had been married to Mahlon for several years without managing to conceive a child. She was probably infertile. The writer hints at this when he tells us in verse 13 that "the Lord enabled her to conceive".

This is one of only two occasions in the entire book that the narrator speaks explicitly about God's action, which suggests that she belonged to that long line of women in the Bible who were initially infertile: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and the mothers of Samson and Samuel.

Ruth feared she would never hold a baby in her arms.

But God has a plan - he always has a plan for our lives - all the twists and turns and heartache and difficulties, he always has a plan, a plan to prosper and not to harm...

And as we approach the end of the book of Ruth, there were surprise endings for all of our characters.

We see this for Ruth...

The Lord responds to the blessing that the elders of Bethlehem spoke over Boaz in verses 11–12: "May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah... May your family be like that of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah." Like the infertile Rachel and the twice-widowed Tamar, the Lord enables Ruth to conceive a baby.

So Ruth was blessed by God and had a baby, a baby that will play a vital role in the unfolding history of Israel as we'll see shortly ...but it was still complicated....Ruth was neither credited as the baby's mother nor was able to nurse him, to feed him, to raise him.

Let's read the words of the women of Bethlehem carefully....

You see, the women of Bethlehem see Boaz as **Naomi's** guardian-redeemer, rather than Ruth's, since he stepped in to restore the fortunes of Elimelek's family, not Ruth's. They see the baby that is born as

Naomi's child, not Ruth's, because he is the fruit of a levirate marriage. Where a man is obliged to marry his brother's widow.

They crowd around the little baby and declare excitedly that "Naomi has a son!" Under Hebrew law, he is not counted as the child of Boaz, but as the son of Mahlon, Ruth's first husband and the grandson of Elimelek.

And see who named the baby - yes, the women of Bethlehem - they named him Obed.

It must have hurt Boaz when the women reminded **Naomi** in front of him that he was legally **her** guardian-redeemer: he had sacrificed his paternity rights for the sake of another.

Boaz expected to cuddle this baby but not to be known as his father.

These final verses therefore contain a surprise ending for Boaz too. He discovers that the God who keeps on giving is the God of death and resurrection. The Lord is delighted that Boaz was willing to sacrifice his own name to preserve that of Elimelek and Mahlon. He therefore responds to the blessing spoken over him by the elders of Bethlehem in verses 11–12: "May **you** have standing in Ephrathah and (may **you**) be famous in Bethlehem... May **your** family be like that of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah."

Yes, Obed will be counted as the heir of Elimelek and Mahlon when it comes to inheriting the Promised Land of Israel, but God has promised his people something far bigger than 8,000 square miles of land in the Middle East.

Obed was counted as the child of Elimelek in the land registry of Israel, but Obed is counted as the child of Boaz in the family tree of David ...the future king.

Just note whose name appears in the family tree at the end of the story: "Salmon the father of Boaz, **Boaz** the father of Obed, Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David."

So, the book of Ruth has a surprise ending for us all.

When this book began by telling us that its events took place during the days of the judges, we did not expect its love story to provide the Lord's solution to the greatest problem of that period: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit."

When the book began with three dead men from the tribe of Judah, we did not expect their family to fulfil God's great promise to their tribe in Genesis 49: 10: where it says "The sceptre will not depart from Judah,until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations shall be his."

We did not expect the last word of the book of Ruth to be David, but of course the writer did. He has been preparing this surprise ending from the very start. He has brought the three books of Joshua, Judges and Ruth to their perfect conclusion.

The big theme of the book of Judges was that God keeps on giving to sinners.

When the family tree at the end of Ruth is extended at the start of Matthew's gospel, we discover just how much this is true.

In the family tree, there is Tamar, who played the prostitute with Judah to conceive Perez. There is Rahab, who played the prostitute with lots of men in Jericho.

There are Boaz and Ruth, the ageing Hebrew bachelor and the Moabite widow. And there is King David, who is not excluded from the Tabernacle by the stipulations of Deuteronomy 23, but invited to build a new Tabernacle on Mount Zion by the lavish grace of God.

The Lord decrees that Ruth will not corrupt the children of Boaz with the idols of Moab. Like Jesus touching lepers, the infection will work the other way around! The Lord purified Ruth and her children, so that they could play a key role in His plan to bless Israel.

The extended family tree in Matthew's gospel keeps on going, way past David, to the birth of Jesus, the true Messiah who was born to their family in Bethlehem eleven centuries later. That would have surprised even the writer of the book of Ruth.

Even he gets to share in this surprise ending inspired by the God who keeps on giving.

So, we see in the book of Ruth, that God can and does use some unexpected people to fulfil his purposes.

In these times of uncertainty and turmoil, let us not forget that our God is always with us and he is a God of Surprises and a God of extreme generosity.

He longs to use us all, whether you are young or old, male or female. We just need to offer ourselves to Him.

At the end of this crisis, that has come upon our country and across the world, let's see where God is leading us and let's say yes to be used by him for His glory and for the building up of others.

Amen.