

Reading: Ruth 1: 13b – 22 ‘No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord’s hand has turned against me!’

At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her. ‘Look,’ said Naomi, ‘your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her.’ 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. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.’ When Naomi realised that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, ‘Can this be Naomi?’ ‘Don’t call me Naomi,’ she told them. ‘Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.’

So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.

Preaching notes:

The book of Ruth begins with the words “in the days when the judges ruled” signifying to those who know their Old Testament history a particular time in Israel’s history when “there was no king... and all people did what was right in their own eyes”. We hear of famine in the land and the family of Elimelech leave the promised land and live in the pagan land of Moab. So named after the son of Lot born through a deceitful and incestuous act.

Following the death of her husband and her two sons Naomi began the journey to return to her homeland with her two daughters-in-law Ruth and Orpah.

These three women would have been very close, undoubtedly living, if not together, then certainly close by and depending on one another. Following the death of Chilion and Mahlon Naomi, Ruth and Orpah begin the journey to Bethlehem but at some point Naomi (see verse 8) tells the two women to go home to their original Moabite families. Orpah goes and Ruth stays.

Of course, as with other Bible accounts, we only see the line of God’s purpose with Ruth not with Orpah. Orpah loved Naomi but not enough to stay with her. Orpah kissed her mother in law (as she left) and Ruth clung to her. Bible commentator Matthew Henry compares Orpah’s clear but limited loyalty and love for Naomi in the same way as some people follow Christ, a level-headed, sensible and outcome based “Christianity” that can fall away at the point where it becomes costly. Orpah went home, perhaps married a man of Moab and had children or perhaps remained single forever, we don’t know. What we do know for certain is that her outcome was dramatically different from Ruth’s whose faithfulness resulted in marrying Boaz and being in the line of the Messiah (see Matthew 1:5).

Consider the rich young man described in Matthew 19: 16-22 who walked away grieving from Jesus because discipleship looked too costly for him, perhaps like Orpah, God had more for him but he just could not commit fully and unconditionally, the things of the world were more important to him.

Tragic death can invoke in some a drawing closer to God as solace and comfort is sought or can instead harden and sour an already partially uncommitted heart. That does not mean that any of us facing grief will not cry out in anger to God asking questions, bitterness, doubt, anger and self-pity will be amongst the emotions that will be experienced in the process of grief but it will pass.

In the midst of the grief and despair that Naomi experiences is her positive, courageous and wise decision to return home, both physically and no doubt spiritually, to Bethlehem and also in the midst of the grief she experiences the loyalty and firm commitment of her daughter-in-law Ruth. As Ruth and Naomi arrive back in Bethlehem it is the beginning of the barley harvest, it is for us a picture of plenty and blessing in comparison to the famine when she left all those years ago. The system of the farmers not reaping to the very edges and allowing the poor to glean (an instruction originating from Leviticus 23) provided the poor with a self-help and dignified way of feeding themselves. They are poor but have returned, these two women (as a mother and daughter) are together and are prepared for what God may provide as emerging from the deep and overwhelming grief. Bitterness is passing and redemption is dawning.

Amen.