

Advent 2. 2014 (7th December) Havant

Concerning Ruth

(in sermon series on biblical women: Sarah, Ruth, the Blessed Virgin and Mary Magdalene)

There's quite a craze these days for TV programmes about the past.

Alongside big series by people like Simon Schama, Simon Sebag Montefiore, David Starkey and others, there are some with a narrower focus like those presented by Lucy Worsley, and the rather quirky Time Team with Tony Robinson.

One thing I find particularly interesting is that so often, as in the examples I've just mentioned, it is not only the subject matter itself but also the human face of the presenter that is part of the attraction. We are fascinated by the past and by the people through whose eyes we are invited to see the past. You won't be surprised then if I give a special place to "Who do you think you are?" For anyone who doesn't know, this is a series in which various famous people are helped to trace their ancestry, sometimes making some surprising discoveries along the way.

The first chapter of St Matthew's gospel is a kind of "Who do you think you are?" applied to Jesus. It is the chapter with all the "begats" that traces the ancestry of Jesus from Abraham, and so it is an important part of the Christmas story. One of the things the Church wants to establish for us by putting this this at the very beginning of the New Testament is that Jesus was not a visitor from outer space, but came from the people whom God gradually formed and led and taught.

A third of the way through the list we read, "*Boaz was the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David, the King.*" So that, somewhat unpromisingly, is my text for this sermon.

The first unusual feature of this verse is that it only one of four instances (before Mary herself) in which a women, the mother in the line, appears in Matthew's list.

Now don't forget that in the normal course of events it "takes two to tango" as they say, so Ruth was as much part of the history, the genes, of King David as her husband Boaz. Obvious, innit? But why, I wonder, pick out Ruth, along with Tamar, Rahab and BathSheba, as the only ones to be mentioned among the 40 who could have been mentioned?

That leads us to the second important point. Although to every father there was a corresponding mother, these

four particular mothers had something in common. They were all, to put it delicately, “different”. Tamar had tricked her father-in-law Judah into bed, Rahab had been a prostitute, Bath Sheba and David were adulterers. OUCH!

Why on earth then, should Matthew have identified these particular female members of the line and what, if anything is this supposed to tell us about Ruth - and ultimately about Mary and Jesus.

I’ll come back to that in a moment due course, but first I need to say a bit about the Book of Ruth, surely one of the most touching and affecting parts of the Bible. On the surface it appears a fairly straightforward historical story. It begins with a refugee Jewish family from Bethlehem, father, mother and two sons, fleeing across the Dead Sea to Moab from famine in their homeland.

Both sons married local, Moabite girls, one of whom was named Ruth. The father and both sons died, and the widowed mother, Naomi, decided to go home to Bethlehem. It would have been expected that as Gentile, that is non-Jewish, girls, both widowed daughters-in-law would stay in Moab, probably returning to their parents and remarrying local men. But one of them, Ruth, insists on going with Naomi; their mutual affection is one of the main human features of the story. “Where you go I will go; where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.”

But that lovely expression of loyal devotion leads us directly to some of the more controversial aspects of the story. One important theme is the acceptability of mixed marriages; just as profound is the possibility that a gentile could embrace God’s law and become a Jew. “Your God will be my God.”

None of this may seem too surprising to us, but it is probable that the Book of Ruth was written at a time when foreigners and immigrants were regarded with great suspicion, and certainly not to be received as full members of God’s chosen people. So already this short story can be seen to pack quite a political and theological punch. Against all tendencies to exclude and demonise those who are different, Ruth is a permanent witness to the wideness of God’s mercy.

On returning to Bethlehem, Naomi prompts Ruth to set her cap at a wealthy relative, and so she acquires her second Jewish husband. If you have had a chance to read the whole book you’ll realise that that sentence is a ridiculously compressed précis of a rather complicate set of events, some of them quite risqué, but the all-important long term outcome is that Ruth ultimately becomes the great-grandmother of King David - and

therefore, as we have seen, an ancestor of Jesus.

I have already said how important the genealogy of Jesus was for Matthew. I have also pointed out that Ruth, like Tamar, Rahab and Bath Sheba were “different”. Different in different ways no doubt but all of them apparently inserted in the list to call into question any simply narrative of of respectable begetting!

Given that absolutely nowhere in the Bible is there any suggestion that God approves of a sexual free-for-all, what on earth is going on?

Matthew himself answers the question. That great list of begettings, including the place of Ruth, comes to an abrupt halt with Joseph, who is not described as “begetting” Jesus, but as being the “husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.”

We don’t know nor could we ever know the details of the lives of Mary and Ruth, nor for that matter of the other wonderful but elusive women in the story. What we can know is that every one of them illustrates the great truth that whatever stories we might like to tell about the orderly succession of historic events (represented in a male-dominated age by the narratives of begetting) it is ultimately God who is in control rather than us.

The OT women in Matthew’s story are different, and also different from each other. Whether as seducer, victim, whore or faithful foreigner, each of them speaks of God’s sovereignty. Above all, Ruth shows us that however important the ordinary historical account, the really decisive factor in the story of salvation is what God is doing behind the scenes.

These off-centre women, including Ruth, are a more fitting parallel for Mary the virgin mother, than all the powerful, regular male figures. In all these cases women, unexpectedly for the age in which these stories are set, took the initiative or at least played a decisive and a willing part. This is not to replace male power with female, because I am sure that had the context been matriarchal the story might have been told the other way round. What it tells us above all is that the real motive force in human history is God’s own activity. And if in human history, so too in the lives of each one of us. Try as you might to make yourself the way you would like, in the end God’s plan must triumph. All you and I can do is frustrate God’s loving purpose. We can delay, deflect, distort God’s plan, but we cannot in the end defeat it.

This is also an important message if we are tempted to stand on our so-called rights. In a famous incident, John the Baptist warned those who came to him for baptism, “Do not presume to say to yourselves, “We have

Abraham as our father”; for I tell you, God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones.” There really are no limits to God’s loving purpose to save.

The story of Ruth illustrates this in other ways too. Do you remember how she first came to Boaz’ attention when she went into his fields to glean. The background to this is the OT law “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field to its very border, nor shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the stranger: I am the Lord your God.” This isn’t an attack on land ownership as such, but it is a challenge to possessiveness in relation to the property we regard as “ours”. Time and again the Old Testament reminds us that sharing the goods of this earth is a matter of justice as well as compassion, and is an obligation that follows directly from being the people of a God who is just and compassionate. It’s hard to be sure, but it seems likely that this little incident in Ruth is not just for dramatic effect but is intended to show how obedience to God’s law is necessary not only for a healthy human society, but also for enabling God’s plan for human history to unfold.

This is all directly applicable to our own lives and understanding, and to the vision of a good society that should guide us as citizens and electors not least in the run up to the General Election next May.

There is just one more aspect of her story which I want to mention before I finish.

You will remember the very human affection that bound Ruth to Naomi at time when she might have been expected to leave her mother-in-law and return home. Instead, that affection led her not only to stay with Naomi and indeed to set off with her to a foreign country and to convert to a new faith. It is not possible to overestimate the importance of our friendships and human relationships for our responsibility to draw others to the worship of God and Christian discipleship. Like Naomi, our faithfulness can be the means by which those whose lives are intertwined with ours can be drawn into the wonder and loveliness of God’s plan. We do not have to always preaching at them, or even at all, but we do have to live in a way that entices them, that may lead to some unlikely converts.

Ruth is not the longest book in the Bible but it contains so many themes to guide us on our journey that reading and pondering it slowly could be a very helpful Advent exercise.