

## Isolation Radio Talk

### Love overcomes every obstacle: Ruth

Good morning. The title of my talk today is 'Love overcomes every obstacle'.

The dogs barked first; then shouting children race out of the village. Strangers! Two women walk wearily up the road into Bethlehem. They walk slowly; the older one staggers; they have travelled far. Villagers watch the strangers - suspiciously. Then an old man calls out to the older woman: 'Don't I know you? Aren't you Naomi, the wife of Elimelech, who left years ago for another country, Moab wasn't it?' The older woman mutters: 'Don't call me Naomi, that means 'pleasant', call me Mara - Bitter.

The story unfolds. Naomi tells them that her husband and their two sons have died. The sons had married Moabite (a different tribe). Women. One of the daughters-in-law stayed behind with her own people but this one, Ruth, had refused to leave her; she had brought her home.

What Ruth said to Naomi lifts the story from the realms of a soap opera to a spiritual drama; perhaps the most beautiful expression of loyalty and love found in the Bible - Ruth says to her mother-in-law; 'where you go, I will go; where you stay, I will stay; where you die, I will die; and there I will be buried'.

Naomi and her husband had been driven by famine to go to the hated Moab; we can only imagine how it was their sons married Moabite women. Her husband and her sons die; there are no children; Naomi urges her daughters-in-law to stay in their own country. Orpah stays but Ruth insists on going with Naomi.

Now **she, Ruth**, is the foreign girl (the immigrant, the outsider); she has lost all. Gently she wins the affection of her new community and falls in love and marries the wealthy Boaz in one of the most beautiful examples of the kind of love, St Paul described ? Years later in his Corinthian letter - a love which bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things; a love that never ends.

Ruth's love, first for her Mother-in-Law and then for her new husband, was the kind that willingly takes on obligations to others and is glad to do it. Poverty, the difficulties of being a foreigner in a strange land, the embarrassment of asking Boaz to marry her - none of these stopped her doing whatever love commanded. Boaz too took the risk of being shunned, of creating problems for his inheritance, because children born of Ruth would not be legally his. You can read this story in the Bible, in the book called Ruth – it is only three pages long. The last sentence gives a twist; Ruth becomes the great-grandmother of King David, the first King of Israel, and who Jesus was descended from by dent of being Joseph and Mary's son. Legend has it that Orpha the sister who remained in Moab becomes the great grandmother of Goliath - but who knows!

Like any good story it has many layers. It is a love story but with different understandings.

### **Religious exclusiveness and bigotry**

If the twist at the end is the point of the story, it is about religious exclusiveness and bigotry. It was aimed at those zealots and reformers, common still today, who insist that faith can only be expressed by sticking strictly to the letter of the law - their law. In those days there were very strict rules against mixed marriages; you can see what it cost Ruth to come to Israel and what it cost Boaz to marry her.

### **Hypocrisy**

The story points out the hypocrisy of forcing people to get rid of foreign wives; it points the finger today at all those who despise and reject those of different culture, colour, and faith. King David, ancestor of Christ, was himself born of foreign blood.

### **Love transforms us**

The story also tells that love transforms us; and the greatest transformation within a community is when there are signs of deepening love; when those, long given to power and control, come to terms with their own vulnerability; when those who are rich work as equals with those who are poor and of different race. The strong are put in touch with their weakness and the weak find strength within themselves; all is born of love. Love always opens new gifts; for all of you who try to follow the Christian way, you must work to cultivate and bring to flower that gift of love. In that way Christ will be known.

### **Jewish liberality**

There is another interpretation. The story is one of Jewish liberality. Never is there any question of rejecting the foreigner; even King David is born of such a line. The high point of the story is not the twist at the end but the overflowing love for Naomi and the holding on to the Israelite part at the expense of the Moabite part. The point is not narrow mindedness but its universal appeal.

Because we are able to read different meanings into such a story possibly those I've offered this morning are true. It is not only the book of Ruth that can have different meanings and insights. Much more of Scripture has equally disturbing interpretations. It says different things to different people and at different times and ages. A particular interpretation is not wrong because I think differently. The way you and I will speak about Easter and the Resurrection - as I have shared with you in recent weeks - is very different from how you and I would have spoken about it say 300 years ago.

Meanings of Scripture ... seldom lie on the surface; they vibrate deep down; they save us from the naive belief that there is **the** scriptural answer. Often, at first glance, the meaning is not clear; nearly always there are pointers to more profound meanings. This must surely be good. In the story of Ruth, openness and tolerance to foreigners is interwoven with a story of loving kindness and steadfast love. This is what Ruth and Orpah show to Naomi: what Ruth shows to Boaz.

It is a story which tells how love overcomes every obstacle; but then, you and I know another story about that; don't we?

Thank you for listening

## Prayer

Let us pray

When we are willing to take up our cross with Jesus we will also know his risen life.

Lord of all, wherever Christians are ridiculed or persecuted for their faith,  
we ask your courage and inner strength;  
wherever we are called to be your witnesses,  
we ask for the grace to communicate your love.  
Wherever love for you has grown cold  
we ask to fan the flames again.

Lord, wherever the human spirit is ground down by oppression,  
and wherever our silence allows injustice and corruption to flourish,  
we ask for deeper compassion and commitment;  
we ask for our kingdoms to become your kingdoms,  
and the desires of your heart to be ours.

Lord of all, wherever families are struggling to stay together,  
and wherever there are ongoing arguments and family feuds,  
we ask your anointing for tranquillity and harmony.  
Wherever children are unwanted and unloved, neglected or in danger,  
we ask your protection and help.

Lord, wherever bodies, minds or spirits are wracked with pain,  
or too weak or exhausted to pray,  
we ask the bathing love of your presence,  
and the practical caring of hands working in your name.  
Wherever there are doubts and the battle is strong,  
we ask your empowering and clear guidance.

Lord of all, wherever the dying are anxious and afraid, we ask your peace;  
wherever the faithful have passed from this life into eternity,  
we commend them to your unchanging and everlasting love  
Wherever nature's beauty or the daily miracles around us  
alert us to see your face,  
we thank you for the grace to live this resurrection life.  
Amen.