Ruth 4 – Session 4

**First Thoughts**

Some things take the breath away every time we think of them. The long, gentle, persevering, loving, joyful patience of a couple with a severely disabled child and then teenager and then young adult, and then…

The medical student who in the middle of that most demanding course did the three-hour there-and-back journey across London every two weeks for two years to spend the evening with a friend suffering with a severe mental health challenge… Every two weeks. Without fail. For two years.

The cheque that came in the post from a couple who weren’t even related to but who knew a family in their church had to move house and who’d figured out that the size of the mortgage was going to make it tough for them for a fair while…

Those things don’t just take the breath away, they’re so extraordinary they evoke more than wonder and gratitude, they evoke praise, an awe that God can make people so very loving, so very generous. And they make us want God to bless them, to pray that he would... lavishly.

In the first three chapters of Ruth, we’ve already seen actions that evoke admiration and wonder and prayer. But deep love has a way of surprising us.

**Read Ruth 4**

**Focus on the Theme**

1. Can you think of any occasions when someone has done something so kind for you or for another person that it’s made you praise God for them? If so, share it with the group.

**What does the Bible Say?**

1. What do we learn about Boaz’s character from the way he manages the negotiations to become Ruth’s guardian-redeemer (4:1-8)?
2. Ruth and Boaz seem to give their firstborn son into Naomi’s care to bring him up (4:16-17). What do you think motivated such an extraordinary gift?
3. The elders and people elevate Ruth to the status of the great matriarchs of Israel (4:11) (cf. 1 Samuel 2:5; Job 1:2). What prompts such remarkable accolades?
4. As well as looking forward to tell us that Obed is the grandfather of Dived, the book looks back to the patriarchs, setting these events in the context of the whole history of Israel (4:18-22). What does this suggest about how God works?

**Going Deeper**

1. The elders and all those at the gate refer to the family of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah (4:12). Tamar, a Canaanite, went to extraordinary lengths to preserve Judah’s line. Read Genesis 38. What is similar and what is different about the two stories, and the two women (Tamar and Ruth), and the two men (Judah and Boaz)? What does the comparison serve to highlight about Ruth?
2. How might Ruth’s gift of her son to Naomi (4:16-17) help us to appreciate the extraordinary nature of God’s gift of his Son (John 3:16)?

**Lot: Remembered and Redeemed**

In the first two chapters of Ruth, there is a heavy emphasis on Ruth’s Moabite nationality. But in chapter 3, the events at the threshing floor recall the tribe’s origin.

In Genesis 19, Lot, Abraham’s nephew, and his wife and two daughters are plucked out of Sodom by a pair of angels just before the incineration of the town. Lot’s wife looks back and is turned into a pillar of salt. Traumatised, Lot hunkers down in a remote cave and fails to even begin to seek husbands for his two daughters. Desperate to preserve the family line, they get him drunk and seduce him. Each bears a son. The first is Moab, mean ‘from father’.

The parallels with Ruth 3 are startling: in both accounts, an unmarried young woman, intent on preserving a family line, takes the initiative to make a nocturnal approach to an older man who has had something to drink. The reader is meant to wonder whether Ruth will seduce the older man as her ancestresses did. It is as if the scene from Genesis 19 is being replayed, but this time it’s being done righteously. Still, the parallel suggests that it’s not just that Ruth is being redeemed, but that Lot’s line, though tainted by sin, is now folded back into the line of blessing.

This is analogous to the parallels Paul makes between the first Adam and the second Adam (Romans 5:12-21). Adam disobeyed in the garden, and did his own will, rejecting the Father’s will. Christ, the second Adam, obeys in the garden, choosing his Father’s will, not his own, demonstrating the possibility of a perfect way, and opening it up to us all.

God had not forgotten Lot’s line. Through Ruth’s purity, it is reincorporated into the covenant people of God. The mistakes and sins of our parents and grandparents and great-grandparents need not be ours. The cycle can be broken.

Nothing in our past is a barrier to being folded into the purposes of God.

**From ‘empty’ to ‘full’**

What kind of role would Naomi play in her grandson’s life? The combination of the startling use of the Hebrew word for ‘wet nurse’ in 4:16, translated here as ‘cared for’, and the townswomen’s announcement that ‘Naomi has a son’ (4:17), both point to a bigger role for Naomi than ‘grannie on call’. It suggests that Naomi would be acting as the child’s primary carer, though, given how small Bethlehem was, inevitably close by Ruth and Boaz. This shift in the usual relationship is reinforced by the women of the town, who state that it will be Obed who will look after Naomi in her old age, rather than Ruth and Boaz. So, Naomi who came back to Bethlehem ‘empty’ (Ruth 1:21) now sits with her arms filled with her ’son’, and a rich life to look forward to.

**Living it Out**

1. Ruth and Naomi’s circumstances have been radically transformed since the end of chapter 1. Looking back on your own life, share an example of how God has turned a situation around.
2. Boaz stands up for Ruth’s interests using his status and skills to do so. Is there someone who you might be able to help get justice?
3. The elders and people at the gate, and the women of the community, publicly acclaim the actions and character of Boaz and Ruth respectively. Is there someone, an unsung hero/heroine perhaps, on your frontline or in your church community whose character or actions you could affirm, privately or publicly – in a church service eve?

**Fruitfulness anticipated**

In Hebrew, as in English, the word ‘seed’ applies both to botanical and human seed. In the NIV In 4:12, the Hebrew for ‘seed’ is translated ‘offspring’. ‘Offspring’, however, misses the implication that ‘seed’ refers not only to the next generation but implies the capacity to create another one after that. Furthermore, Boaz’s lavish gift of grain to Naomi in 3:15-17 was not merely giving her food, but symbolically promising to seek to meet her other need – for a child through Ruth.