

Ruthless Loyalty, Ruthless Courage

A sermon on Ruth 1 by Jude Waldron, 31 October 2021

When have you been brave? What gave you the impetus to be brave?

Today my church celebrate what we call “Heroes Day”. We always do this around Halloween/All Saints day, but we don’t dress up scary. We are celebrating the lives of those who have gone before in faith and are great examples of how to live lives that honour God.

One bible person that is a big hero is Ruth. And she’s a bit of an unexpected hero, because she wasn’t a king or a warrior or a prophet. She didn’t do miracles or have amazing words from God. She’s also a woman – which is the minority in heroes from the bible. Basically, it seems that all she really did was accept the hand that life dealt her and then made the best of it – and wonderful things came out of that down the track. You see, the thing that is remarkable about Ruth is not that she was a person with amazing skills or God-moments or historical events. The remarkable thing about Ruth is her character. We honour Ruth because of her loyalty, her courage, her humility, resourcefulness, risk-taking, resilience. This is a remarkable woman of character, worth studying and worth emulating.

The interesting thing about character, is that it is most evident when things are tough. It doesn’t take much character to do the things you enjoy that don’t cost you much and generally are immediately rewarding. But it’s when the chips are down, that your character comes through. The chips were really down in this story. We start with a famine in a town ironically named “Bethlehem” which means “house of bread”. And Naomi and her husband Elimelech head off to Moab. Now, let’s get our heads around what Israelites thought of Moab. Moab was the enemy. In the era of Ruth, Israel had been at war with Moab. You might remember the donkey story, where Balaam the prophet is on his way to help Moab and his donkey talks to him and stops him? He ended up cursing Moab three times. There’s another story in Judges about Ehud the prophet and Eglon, the king of Moab. Ehud is left handed, which means that when he approached the king and was searched for his short-sword strapped to his thigh, they would look on the wrong side. So when he got private time with King Eglon of Moab, he said “The lord has a message for you.” And Eglon said, “What is it?” and Ehud says “THIS” and whips out his surprising sword and plunges into the king’s fat belly so much that the fat closed over it. And then Ehud leaves and no one knows that Eglon has been killed. That’s Moab.

When you read in Genesis about where Moab came from, you read a sordid tale about Lot’s daughters getting him drunk and sleeping with him, and one gets pregnant with Moab and the other with the beginning of the Ammonite tribe. That’s who Moabites were to the Israelites – bastard children of incest. Imagine the Israelites telling this story over and over about who that scum across the river were. Have we got it?

Elimelech and Naomi go to Moab out of desperation. They will starve if they stay in Bethlehem. They settle, they have sons and those sons marry women of Moab. We have inter-racial marriage going on here. And then the father and both sons die and you are left with three women who have no husbands and no sons to look after them.

What has Ruth stepped into? She is tied to a woman not of her own race, she has no husband. She is barren – 10 years married and no children. She is in trouble. For Naomi, the path forward is obvious: go home. Ruth and her sister in law should go back to their Moabite homes, be supported by their families. But no one is going to care for Naomi here in Moab, it’s best she goes home to Bethlehem where the famine is over and the food is back on the table, and she has family and friends to welcome her. She has nothing in Moab, and she sees

herself as nothing good for her daughters in law. I wonder if you know someone who sees themselves as no good?

But Ruth chooses to go to a land where she will be a widow, childless, filthy Moabite. That's what she chooses. Unprotected. Unsupported. Despised. Poor. Endangered. Why?

This is where we need two Hebrew words: Hesed and Hutzpah. [Practice] Loosely, you can translate them to loyalty and courage. Ruth was both soft and strong. It's hayfever season again, and for me the choice of tissues is critical. When I blow my nose, I really blow – it's possible for me to leave tissues in a shower of snow-like scraps. These tissues need to be strong. But because it's hayfever, the frequency with which I blow my nose is high, and it can get really rough on the skin, so soft, mousteurised tissues are heaven. This is a big demand on tissues – to be both soft and strong, soft enough to care gently for my nose, strong enough to take the blasts and not disintegrate. I think Ruth was like the best tissues. She was soft enough to care and strong enough to take the burden of the care. Hesed and hutzpah. Loyalty and courage.

Hesed is a key word in the book of Ruth – it keeps on getting used. We don't have a good English word for it, because it's a unique concept. Sometimes the bible will call it loving kindness, or compassion, or commitment, or mercy. There are three aspects for hesed. The first is that someone is in need of something that they can't provide themselves to survive. It's an essential basic thing like food or shelter. Without it, they will perish. The second thing is that the person who is showing hesed is uniquely placed at that time to give that essential thing. No one else has that resource. It is up to them. The third thing is that this is given in the context of a relationship that is loving and good. It's not a random act of kindness to a stranger. It's not given as forgiveness for a wrong. It's a gift given that shows that the relationship is good, loving, functional and committed. This is hesed, and Naomi says to Ruth and Orpah: May God show you his hesed, as you have shown hesed to your husbands and to me.

Naomi shows us that this quality of hesed is exactly what we experience in God. In a covenant relationship with God, we find ourselves with deep needs that we can't fill, and God – the one who is uniquely placed to provide - shows us extraordinary kindness. It is mercy and love and commitment and loyalty that is in God's nature. And while Naomi can't claim it for herself, she knows God has done it in the past and prays it for her beloved daughters in law. Why does Ruth show hesed? Because she has experienced it in Naomi's God, Yahweh. It is the lovingkindness of God that empowers us to be extraordinarily soft-and-strong to others.

How are you at being loyal? During a high school concert, a father boasted to the people sitting around him "That's my son!" The boy had been playing the trumpet solo perfectly up to that point, and then fluffed some notes and made mistakes. "Well," said the father, "They all look alike from back here." Hopefully, you can be loyal to the ones you love, even when they are not so great. Ruth was married to a man who had a lovely mum – her name meant "pleasant" – but now at this point, she is bitter and older and grumpier and difficult to be with. Are you good at being kind when the person you are meant to be loyal to is difficult?

The other thing about hesed is that it is not compulsory. It's extraordinary, above and beyond. Orpah was a good daughter in law. She was willing to stick with Naomi until she was urged to go. She was crying at the crossroads, too. There is nothing wrong with Orpah's choice. She was upstanding, within her rights, caring and fulfilled her obligations. But Ruth went way beyond the call of duty. She was extraordinary – that is hesed. But in order to be extraordinary you need courage. Loyalty is the decision to enter into something that is undesirable for the sake of someone else. You are valuing that person over your own comfort,

your own safety, your own status, your own gain. Ruth is saying in her actions: You are worth all of the difficulty that is ahead of me in taking this path. Ruth says, “I don’t care where I live, as long as it’s with you. I don’t care where we go, as long as it’s with you. I don’t care who is our community (I’m a filthy Moabite to them, I’ll still love ‘em), as long as it’s with you. I will stay with you until I die.” Friends, that takes courage.

In the Moscow circus a beautiful woman lion tamer would have a fierce lion come to her meekly, put his paws around her and nuzzle her with affection. The crowd thundered its approval, all except one man who declared, “What’s so great about that? Anybody can do that!” The ringmaster challenged him, “Would you like to try it?” The man replied, “Yes, but first get that lion out of there!”

Courage is the quality that says “I will get into the ring with the lion.” How is your courage these days? Are you able to deliberately step into the discomfort? Are you able to defy expectation? Do you have the courage to self-sacrifice and to love unconditionally?

Ruth experienced God’s hesed. She then showed hesed to Naomi. God’s kindness gave her the courage and loyalty to be that extraordinary woman of character. And this extraordinary woman of character in turn was part of Naomi’s transformation. In chapter 1, when we meet Naomi, she is bitter, but as we progress through this story, you will see that the hesed that Ruth shows demonstrates the hesed of God to Naomi, and this transforms her, into a woman of joy and gratitude. Loyalty and courage are worth it – they are transformational.

So what do we do with this story? Firstly, we can consider who has been courageously loyal in our lives? Who has shown us loving kindness and met a need in our lives when we couldn’t meet it ourselves? This week, I urge you to thank God for them, and then thank them too. Tell them the impact they made in your life.

The second thing is for us to consider – who is it that needs me to show God’s hesed this week. Is there someone with a need that I am uniquely placed to fulfil? Is there someone who needs my loyalty, even if it costs me? Is there someone who needs me to say “I think you’re worth it – you are worth my attention and time and resources and care”? How can I be kind?

I’m sorry. Here I am encouraging you to have extraordinary kindness and courage, in a time where all of us are running on empty. We are all tired, we are all feeling scarcity in many ways. The beauty of worship at South Yarra is that you are always ultimately directed to the source of our strength, the cross and resurrection of Christ, the feeding of communion. This is a time to remember the hesed of Christ – those three elements: who is uniquely placed (the only one who can); to give us what we desperately need and can’t do for ourselves; not as a random act of kindness, but as a sign of the deep commitment God has to us. Those three things of hesed are found at this table and at the foot of the cross. Christ’s soft-but-strong love. A body broken yet resurrected. A violent death but a lamb that made no protest. Soft broken bread, washed down with hearty, strong wine. A God of lovingkindness and a human of great courage.

This lovingkindness is unexpected, undeserved, beyond what any reasonable person would do. And it’s transformational. We receive the love of God and it turns us from the bitterness of a Naomi into a new person. If you’re struggling to find hesed and chutzpah in yourself, let the hesed and chutzpah of Christ transform you.

How can we be a Ruth? Receive Yahweh’s hesed. Enter into God’s grace. Accept the self-emptying gift of Christ. And being fed by Christ, you can then answer the commission of Christ, “Where you go I will go, because you live I live, your people are my people, you Jesus Christ are my God.”