

**Manningham Uniting Church**  
**Summer Series on the Book of Ruth**  
**14th January 2024 Text: Ruth Chapter 2**  
**Theme: Hope for the Marginalised**

### **Introduction**

Last Sunday we focused on Chapter One of the Book of Ruth.

### **Let's recap...**

Naomi, an Israelite, leaves her home during a famine. While away, in Moab, her husband and sons die. Naomi convinces one of her Moabite daughters-in-law, Orpah to return to her homeland and seek a new life. The other, Ruth, refuses, declaring her love and loyalty to Naomi: *"Ruth said, 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."* (Ruth 1:16,17)

The story of Ruth is a story of the pain and tragedy of life, the story of just how difficult life can get. Let's not forget that "the story of Ruth takes place within a full-fledged patriarchal culture. As you know, patriarchy is a social system that privileges men over women, where the actions of men command the focus, and women (with few exceptions) recede into the background. Under patriarchy, a woman derives her value from men — her father, husband, and especially her sons. Sons are the patriarchy's gold standard for determining the value of a woman."<sup>1</sup>

But it's also a story of how we can find HOPE in times of difficulties. And it's a story of how pain and grief can be transformed into joy and peace. With God pain, difficulties, and suffering are not the last words.

This morning we focus on Ruth Chapter Two.

**Let us pray...** God, may my words be loving and true; and may those who listen discern what is not. And all God's people say, **AMEN**.

Let's not forget the cultural, social, economic and political contexts in which Ruth and Naomi lived. Naomi and Ruth lived in a turbulent time. The global stage was dominated by political instability, penetrated national borders, gender inequality, racial disparity, international tensions, economic crises, injustice, violence, wars, and natural disasters.

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<sup>1</sup> Custis James, Carolyn. Finding God in the Margins: The Book of Ruth (Transformative Word) . Lexham Press. Kindle Edition.

“In the days when the judges ruled” is hardly a promising beginning. Even without cable news or internet access, all two characters were doubtless regularly bombarded with alarming news. Closer to home, family problems weighed heavily. Economic recovery from an extended famine doesn’t happen overnight. Remember there wasn’t any financial help from the State or Federal governments.

In the ancient world, for a family to die without a male heir was a fate most feared. Everyone was struggling. It was a time when a person’s problems could easily be unnoticed by others too consumed with their own problems and who otherwise might otherwise lend a helping hand. There is an unfortunate fact that societies have marginalized people. It’s not unfortunate that there are people – but that these people are marginalized.

Here in the book of Ruth, we see some sources of marginalization.

In biblical times, the four most marginalised demographics were **the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the alien**. And the offences against them weren’t minor. Naomi’s daughters-in-law were at risk in all four categories. They were widows, poor, and foreign. Given the distance between Bethlehem and Moab, even the orphan label fit them, for no father was around to defend them.

However, we know the heart of YHWH: *“For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt.”* (Deuteronomy 10:17–19)

Lest we romanticise life in Ruth and Naomi’s world, we would do well to remember again that females were often bargaining chips in a male-dominated culture. And it still is in many cultures. Patriarchy is very much alive today. Ruth was a woman, a foreign woman a woman from Moab. She was an immigrant from Jordan (Moab) to Israel. If Ruth’s story took place today, she’d be classified as Arab and most likely be a Muslim.

Despite all that, she crossed the border from Jordan into Israel without a hitch. There was no ban on Jordanians, no security checkpoint, no wall or barbed-wire fences, no drones or border patrol. Not even extreme vetting. It was a good thing because she didn’t have a passport or visa. Sometimes we forget that Biblical history is largely the story of immigrants too. God called Abraham to become an immigrant, moving him from Iraq (Ur) to Turkey (Haran) and finally, into Palestine (Canaan; Gen 12:1, 4–5). His grandson Jacob and Jacob’s sons (the fathers of Israel’s twelve tribes) became immigrants in Egypt during a severe

regional famine (Gen 46:1–27). They never left. Four hundred and thirty years and multiple generations later (Exod 12:40), Moses and Joshua led a whole nation of immigrants (Jacob’s descendants) on a forty-year journey from Egypt back to Palestine, where they settled.

And the Mosaic law contains numerous strong instructions regarding immigrants (a.k.a. “the foreigner”) in Israel and how YHWH expected Israelites to care for them.

(Exod 22:21; 23:9, 12; Lev 23:22; Deut 10:18–19).

*“When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God”* (Lev 19:33–34).

Unfortunately, many countries are not very welcoming of refugees and migrants these days. Believe it or not, Trump says immigrants are ‘poisoning the blood’ of America and destroying the fabric of the country. And millions of Americans agree with him.

A small number of countries are bearing almost all the responsibility, while most countries in the world have scarcely received any refugees at all.

At the end of 2022, some **108 million people** around the world were displaced from their homes by conflict, violence, or persecution – the highest figure ever recorded.

As we entered 2024, 108,436,353 people were displaced by persecution and conflict.

Over 33 million refugees have been granted protection in another country in the last ten years. The continuing wars in Ukraine and Israel and Palestine will add to those figures. I am so proud of the ministry that we are doing for and with the refugees.

Ruth was poor. She was a widow, and no man to take care of her.

COVID-19 leaves a legacy of rising poverty and widening inequality. The global economy is beginning to bounce back from the economic ravages of the coronavirus pandemic.

But this recovery is not being experienced equally. Unfortunately, the poorer countries are contending with a deeper, long-lasting crisis that has increased global poverty and is reversing recent trends of shrinking inequality. The result is that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is largest for the world’s poorest.

Emerging evidence shows that within countries, inequality may also have worsened.

The World Bank’s phone surveys in developing economies showed that poorer households lost incomes and jobs at slightly higher rates than richer households, a trend that contributes to the worsening of global poverty and inequality.

That's because vulnerable groups – women, those with low education, and those informally employed in urban areas – were hit particularly hard.

Financial and cost-of-living pressures are among the top issues impacting Australians' sense of belonging, pride and social cohesion in 2023, according to a major study from The Australian National University (ANU) and the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute. Economic and social issues, compounded with growing concern about inequality, has seen social cohesion in Australia plummet to its lowest level in 16 years.<sup>2</sup>

The study also found about two in five Australians, 41 per cent, describe themselves as either poor, struggling to pay their bills or just getting by in 2023. This is up from 37 per cent in 2022. The study also found the proportion of people who feel a great sense of belonging in Australia fell to a record low of 48 per cent in 2023.

*“For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt.”* (Deuteronomy 10:17–19)

Where is the hope for the marginalised? The problems appear too huge for we mortals to solve. Where is God?

In verse two of Chapter two of Ruth, we see that Ruth was a very resourceful woman, made of strong stuff, who is prepared to work: *“And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, “Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain behind someone in whose sight I may find favour.”*

Ruth may expect to be looked down upon in the fields of Bethlehem. A foreigner, a woman on her own, begging for mercy. We can imagine rudeness, sexual advances, and violence will almost certainly come her way, from people in Bethlehem who are better off than she is, as well as from other gleaners who might see her as an intruder who comes to take away what they think is rightfully theirs.

Even today, we find women marginalized by men, by society. It breaks my heart when I hear of women being abused, objectified, and demeaned by men in our society.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.anu.edu.au/news/all-news/cost-of-living-pressures-sees-social-cohesion-hit-record-low#:~:text=The%20study%20also%20found%20about,increasingly%20concerned%20about%20economic%20inequality.>

It should not be.

By the grace of God, she was allowed to glean. Landowners of ancient Israel were to follow these instructions: *“If you are harvesting in your field and overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the foreigner, the fatherless, and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands”* (Deut. 24:19). By the grace of God, Ruth is in that strip of the fields that belonged to Boaz of Elimelech’s family.

By the grace of God, Boaz came from Bethlehem and met Ruth and discovered who she is and allowed her to glean. *Boaz said to Ruth, “Now listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women. Keep your eyes on the field that is being reaped and follow behind them. I have ordered the young men not to bother you. If you get thirsty, go to the vessels and drink from what the young men have drawn.”* (Ruth 2:8,9). Ruth is very grateful, she prostrates herself before him on the ground.

There is a word in the Book of Ruth that furnishes us hope. And the word is *hesed*. *Hesed* is a key word in the book of Ruth – it keeps on getting used. *Hesed* is a powerful word in the Bible and the most important word in the book of Ruth. It shows up three times, but the concept runs throughout the whole story and ultimately drives the action.

Naomi says it first when she attempts to part from her daughters-in-law. *“May the LORD show [hesed] to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me”* (1:8). She says it again when Ruth brings home her gleanings. *“He has not stopped showing his [hesed] to the living and the dead”* (2:20). Boaz uses *hesed* to describe Ruth’s actions when she proposes marriage to him. *“This [hesed] is greater than that which you showed earlier”* (3:10).

The word *hesed* is difficult to convey in English, so translations differ on how to express it. *Should it be “lovingkindness” (ASV), “Steadfast love” (ESV), “mercy” (KJV), “faithfulness” (NASB), or simply “love” (NIV)?* Most commentators agree that none of these translations express the meaning of the word fully, but touch on components of it.

In the Old Testament... [*Hesed*] is the way God intended for human beings to live together from the beginning — the “love-your-neighbour-as-yourself” brand of living, an active, selfless, sacrificial caring for one another that goes against the grain of our fallen natures. *Hesed* is a costly brand of love that involves going above and beyond what anyone has a right to ask or expect. It is the brand of love at work in the actions of Ruth, Boaz, and ultimately of Naomi too. The Book of Ruth puts God’s *hesed* on display.

We will learn along with Naomi that God's *hesed* love is indiscriminate, unearned, and persistent. YHWH's *hesed* will reach Naomi through the selfless and relentless commitment of Ruth to fight for her, and Boaz will join Ruth in this effort.

We find this family and its individuals marginalized by the circumstances and choices of their lives, and yet through this book, we get to see God's heart for the marginalized. Amid the rebellion of the nation, God is aware of the marginalized. Throughout scripture – we find places where God has a heart for the fatherless, for widows, for the foreigner, for the poor. God has made provision for the marginalized in many ways.

Ruth experienced God's *hesed*. She then showed *hesed* to Naomi. So what do we do with this story?

**Firstly**, 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.

**Secondly**, it 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 *hesed*, even if it costs me?

The marginalised in our society need *hesed*. Remember, this *hesed*, this lovingkindness is unexpected, undeserved, beyond what any reasonable person would do. And it's transformational.

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." AMEN.