

Operating in the Marketplace - Case Study 2 – Ruth

Around the world the Holy Spirit is reminding churches that “ordinary” Christians can be influential in their marketplaces. Not necessarily in formal ecclesiastical settings, which few people really understand and many find unattractive, but where they are for the remaining six days of the week. Not because they are special or talented in their own right, not even more religious or “worthy” than others, but because God is bigger than them and can bring about His purposes, their differences and personal circumstances notwithstanding.

The trouble with some heroes

The pages of the Bible are replete with stories of men and women who orchestrated, or were instrumental in achieving, great exploits for God. Names like Joshua, Deborah, Samson, Gideon, David, Daniel and the Apostle Paul spring to mind. What they went through, including their dark periods, is recorded for our benefit, to teach us.

The trouble with some heroes of God is that the nature of their achievements is wildly beyond the reach of most Christians today. Learn from, them, by all means, leverage on the lessons, but we will never share the same cultural or historical contexts. They stand out like beacons, declaring the power and radiance of the presence of God, but it was for their time. Now they are gone, and it is not our task to emulate them.

We live in a different era to the heroes and heroines of the Bible, with different challenges (albeit with the same limitless God). They are like observers at the side of our own race in life (Hebrews 11), cheering us on as we reach for the finishing line. Some of us will be used to undertake exploits. Others will go through experiences in which we feel our world is falling apart. Regardless, all of us are called to be faithful to Christ and reach the world around us with His love.

Where have all the ordinary people gone?

In Stephen Spielberg’s recent movie, *Munich*, the protagonist, a Israeli Mossad (secret service) agent named Abner who has been selected for a special task asks “why me”? He doesn’t feel like a hero (although his father was one, making him feel doubly depressed when friends mention it). It is the Summer of 1972. Abner has just told his wife he has the most boring job in the world.

Suddenly, he is called to meet Prime Minister Golda Meir, who asks him to undertake a major secret mission on behalf of his country, hunting down those who organized the massacre of Israeli athletes at the Munich Summer Olympiad. Abner is bemused about the choice. His handler responds that he has been picked because he is so “ordinary”: He will do great things, but must remain anonymous. The glory will not go to him. The circumstances are about national honour, not Abner.

God uses “ordinary” people to do extraordinary things. His purpose is not about them, their skills, special features, reputation, or great talents, but using the banality of their lives, combined with the anointing of the Holy Spirit and divine circumstances, to achieve unique outcomes for His glory.

The story of Ruth is an account of someone whose background was banal but was chosen and used (by God) for a special mission. Unlike Abner, she didn’t have to depend on her own cunning; instead, she learned to allow God to bring about His purpose; her willingness to do so gave her a place in history.

Background – a brief synopsis of Ruth’s life

Ruth was one of the Old Testament’s classic “ordinary people”. Ethnically, she was a Moabitess; her homeland lay in what is today part of Jordan. She was the daughter-in-law of a Jewish woman named Naomi. Her father-in-law, husband and brother-in-law died in quick succession, in tragic circumstances, far from home, without “protectors”. When a famine that originally drove Naomi and her menfolk from Israel to Moab abated Naomi decided to go home to Bethlehem, leaving her daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, to return to their villages, find new husbands and get on with life. There, at least, they would have reasonable chances of starting over. Naomi was determined not to burden her daughters-in-law with false guilt, cultural baggage or mother-in-law expectations, so she released them from all obligations and started the long journey home.

Ruth was more dedicated to Naomi than her mother-in-law first realized. She rejected the logic of “going home to Mum” (to familiar people, gods, lifestyle and circumstances) and elected to migrate to Israel with Naomi at the beginning of the barley harvest. She pled to go with her:

"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 anything but death separates you and me." (Ruth 1:17-18)

Ruth’s declaration took Naomi by surprise. She was prepared to turn her back on everything, friends, family gods, security (after all, she was still living in her own neighbourhood, even though she had made a choice to marry outside of her religious and cultural circles), for an uncertain future as a rank outsider in another society. There is no evidence Ruth had ever been outside of Moab, so the decision to leave was bound to be a traumatic one. Nevertheless, Naomi took the hint and stopped urging her to be pragmatic and go back home to her mother.

Once in Bethlehem, Ruth found part-time work gleaning barley. This involved picking up grain missed by harvesters; it was reserved for the destitute, a bit like rag pickers on the fringes of society in so-called Third World countries. Moses’ Law encouraged gleaning (Leviticus 19:9-10). Public welfare was unknown in

the ancient world; like people in modern Darfur (Sudan), without outside help people simply starved to death if famine, social dislocation or sickness struck.

As it turned out, Ruth found herself working in a field owned by an unmarried land-owner named Boaz, an older man, who was a distant relative of Naomi's deceased husband. As a result of her attitudes and hard work, Ruth found favour with Boaz, and with the entire village. She worked long hours, was honest, didn't make excuses, didn't pursue the young, marriageable men (Ruth 3:10), showed moral strength and did all she could for Naomi.

Ruth's actions did not go unnoticed. In due course she married Boaz and they had a son. One of their great-grandchildren was King David. Jesus Christ was in her line of direct descendants. According to scholars, the author of the book of Ruth was the Prophet Samuel, a deeply conservative Jewish theologian who anointed David King over Israel. Knowing that David's family line came (in part) from Moabite stock must have given him cause to reflect on the plans of God that didn't make sense but reflected His higher purpose. This was compounded by the fact that Boaz also came from a mixed line (his mother Rahab was a Canaanite prostitute who had been spared in the sacking of Jericho for helping Israelite soldiers who had entered the city to spy on its defences; she became known as a woman of faith, cf Hebrews 11:31). God's ways are higher than ours.

The characteristics of Ruth

Ruth was an ordinary woman, but she changed history. Let's look at her life a bit more closely.

For a start, she was a female in a proud, strongly patriarchal society. She came from an ethnic minority that was despised by most practicing Jews (the ancestors of Moab were born from an incestuous relationship between Abraham's nephew Lot and one of his daughters, cf Genesis 19:31-38). She had the "wrong" genes in a matrilineal society, where any children born to her could not be accepted as part of the Jewish community (legally this would take several generations.). As a non-Jew, she was outside of "the promise", or covenant, between God and His People. She would always be regarded as an outsider. She had already been through one marriage, so she was regarded as "second hand" in a society where men valued the pedigree and purity of their wives. She entered Israel as an economic refugee and had no obvious job skills or support mechanisms. She came from a family background that worshipped idols, and had to fit into a monotheistic society. In summary, she started out behind the rest of the pack. If anyone was going to have to change, it was Ruth.

Ruth comes across for her willingness to cross the cultural divide, find God and serve others amid adversity. Her story is told affectionately around the world, long after rulers and potentates of her era were obscured by the hand of history.

This cross-over must have been excruciating; and she did it while grieving the loss of her husband. When Ruth and Naomi arrived in Bethlehem she was

beyond the preferred age of marriage. She had no status. She didn't have the required "street smarts" and had to rely on Naomi to teach her how to cope.

So, why was Ruth used by God? As an expatriate working in a marketplace that was "closed" in many ways, how did she make a difference and end up with a book in the Bible bearing her name.

First, she saw beyond her great trials and losses and acknowledged God. Abandoning the idolatry of her birth family, she told Naomi, "Your God will be my God". This is telling, because many people, in such circumstances, would have blamed God instead, asserting that, if He was powerful and "fair", He would not have allowed such calamities to strike a family committed to Him.

Maybe it was something in her mother-in-law's life that commended faith in God. If you read Judges and Ruth contextually you will realise that the period concerned went down in history as a time of spiritual darkness and political anarchy in Israel. The Book of Judges describes a divided people who had largely marginalized God, forsaken the Law, perverted true worship by substituting other deities and lost sight of morality and character. In the midst of this, Ruth (somewhat ironically, given that she was a foreigner) stands out as one woman who managed to live a godly life. That must have taken great courage.

Second, she was willing to listen to the voices of experience, as she complied with Naomi regarding her new life in Bethlehem, and the social mores of women in her adopted culture. She was prepared to humble herself, to suffer personal ignominy and the rejection of others if such was the will of God. She was willing to start again at the bottom, even as a gleaner, working long hours beside other people in need, if that was what it took.

Third, she was prepared to make hard decisions and go beyond her comfort zone, even in her nascent relationship with the people of Jerusalem and with Boaz. She knew she was different and that many would have regarded her with aloofness or suspicion. After all, the people of Moab were regarded as a heathen people. They had been enemies of Israel. Moses specifically excluded Moabites from "the assembly of the Lord" (Deuteronomy 23:3-6). They were virtual "untouchables". Ruth ran the risk of dragging Naomi down with her. Instead of giving into despair, she sought God's favour.

Fourth, she had a positive attitude. When Naomi changed her own name to Mara, meaning "bitterness", and sat at home feeling that life had been hard to her, Ruth refused to give in to negativity. She didn't vocalize whatever anger or helplessness she may have felt. When others were becoming weary and giving up, she continued to labour under the hot sun, only taking short rests in the middle of the day to recover her strength. What many of us would have taken as a basis for resigning to the "unfairness and hardships" of life, Ruth turned to opportunities to serve those less well off, starting with her mother-in-law.

Fifth, she became known, and accepted, in the wider community as a woman of integrity, a hard and honest worker with noble character, and morally upright.

Her conduct was closely observed. She became known as a “virtuous woman” (Ruth 3:11), a trait lauded by her great-great grandson Solomon as eminently preferable to external beauty any day (Proverbs 31:30).

So, what does all this mean for us?

Some people see in the story of Ruth a shadow, or type, of the unconditional love of God and the salvation we have in Christ. While there are certain parallels that make the account relate to the redemptive metanarrative of the Bible, if we look at the first level of the account of Ruth we see a woman who chose to follow God and His purpose for the unfolding of her life. Her account has lessons for us, as we confront the spiritual darkness in our own generation; we do well to identify and emulate them.

Christianity in the marketplace is not about doing, but “being” people of God, men and women of character and influence, living for Him, on His terms. When the inhabitants of Bethlehem judged Ruth, and saw in her attitudes and actions a nobility of character that outshone them all and glorified God, she became His minister in her marketplace. There was nothing false or contrived about her new life in Israel. It was probably very hard. What she did, she did to survive; it reflected her character.

Likewise, when you and I are under the hot spotlight of circumstances, what comes out will be a manifestation of what we are like inside; if we are serving Christ our deep and abiding faith in God who is “there” with us is what will emerge.

Society today needs less pontification about lax morals, the nihilism of young people and the inequities of life, and more men or women who inhabit the same space as others but live for God and believe He is trustworthy; neighbours who are not motivated by bitterness, but dependent on Him, believing that all our days were ordained by our Heavenly Father, enabling us to commit everything to Jesus Christ.

Life often seems unfair. Our plans go astray, for a host of reasons, many of which are beyond our control. God is bigger than culture, history, the dislocations we sometimes experience and the smallness we feel in the face of life’s great challenges and circumstances. His will and purpose are eternal. He can guide us through the night and the dark clouds that form on the horizon. The Bible says (rather graphically) that he collects our tears in his bottle (Psalm 56:8), so great is His care for us. We are never out of His sight. All our days are foreseen by Him. He is more interested in who we are than in what we do. He has promised to withhold from us nothing that we need, as we walk with integrity (Psalm 84:11). He will give us favour and grace (His “free gift”) and use us in the areas in which we allow Him to do so. This is God’s program. Circumstances are not dominant.

Armed with these facts, we can face any situation, overcome anger, resentment, bitterness and hurt and win battles. People in our marketplace, who do not have the same resources that we have through Christ, will see the difference.

As Christians we are able (if we take the opportunity) to benefit from the experiences and wisdom of fellow-believers who have “been there” and remain focused on what is important. Do you know people who need friendship and advice; who can look at your example and be strengthened in their own walk? Too many people in the marketplace have been burned by bad experiences with churches and church-goers. We can live the exception, and draw them to a closer relationship with Jesus.

Making the right choices

The story of Ruth is about choices and consequences. In Ruth’s case, the key moment was when she made the choice to commit herself to Naomi. No doubt there were many hard times in her life, as she coped with cultural misunderstanding, financial need, personal grief and aching loneliness. How do you and I react when we are confronted by the crossroads of life, when our plans go astray, when all that we have worked for collapses and needs to be rebuilt? In the midst of her tears, Naomi came to see that Ruth was different from all the rest. As a result, her own attitudes slowly changed.

I am reminded of Paul’s great statement about overcoming adversity:

“But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him”. (2 Corinthians 2:14)

There is a sense here that, as we interface with our marketplace, when the squeeze is on, the aroma that is detected can be redolent of Christ. People need to see first hand that our relationship with God is real and that He can give us the power and the capacity to be different.

Sometimes we don’t see the results of the choices we make, of the seeds we plant. We are not given to understand the total meaning of our lives. Ruth died without knowing she would be the ancestress of King David and Jesus Christ. Samuel, in writing her story, had the wisdom of hindsight. He could see how everything fitted into place, how God’s plan worked out. But Ruth didn’t have a clue. She lived and died without realizing the role she would play in history. There are many results of our lives that we will never see. We need to learn to “rest” in God; as we go through changes that make us feel uncomfortable. We need the confidence that He sees the bigger and longer picture and that, as we are led by Him, the lifestyle decisions we make and the way we invest of our lives in our individual marketplaces will result in good.

If we want those marketplaces to change, we need to secure God’s perspective and practice it. Drought will not quench it, nor will social dislocation, nor relational setbacks. By gaining God’s outlook, we will be able to face up to the

heat of the day, so to speak, and produce generational change that will glorify Him in our family and social circles for years to come.