

22 June 2014

West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

Preaching in of Rev Dr Jonanda Groenewald

by Rev Dr Andre Groenewald

Text: Ruth 1:1-18

Background to the reading (Andre):

This morning, I would like to focus on the journey of the great, great, great, great grandmother of Jesus, namely Ruth.

The story of Ruth is one of love that would one day resonate well with the whole coming of Christ to the world. But is also a story of her journey, full of surprises and unexpected miracles.

Let me start at the beginning. There was a family living in Bethlehem. Bethlehem actually means “house of bread”. But the irony was that this “house of bread” had no bread left. So the head of the family, Elimelech, left the land of his forefathers, Judah, to go to Moab - to the land of the enemy - with his wife Naomi, and two sons Mahlon and Kilion. Elimelech’s name means “God is king”.

In Moab Elimelech died. His two sons eventually married Moabite women - Ruth and Orpah. This is remarkable in the sense that they only married these Gentile women after their father has died. Why? Well I can only assume that because he was a typical Jewish Patriarch, he would not have allowed his sons to marry Gentile women. In Deuteronomy 7 God clearly told his people not to marry foreign women or men. The Jews despised all gentiles and even called them “dogs”.

After Mahlon and Kilion died Naomi was left on her own with only the two Gentile women. Naomi then heard that there was plenty food again in her native land Judah and thought that it was time to return to her home country and home village. But she knew her situation was desperate. She could only hope that some family member would take care of her because if you did not have a husband or sons to take care of you, you had no future at all. You were at the grace of family members to help you or to send you away!

Naomi knew this pretty well and said to her new in-laws to return to their fathers so that they at least could be cared for. Naomi most probably was also afraid of the reaction of her people towards her Gentile daughters-in-law. After all, the Moabites were the enemies of Judah.

So Naomi did everything possible to deter them from coming with her. But after three times, **Ruth refused to go**, while Orpah left with a heavy heart.

Ruth said to her mother-in-law that she will stay with her and journey through life with her. That she no longer is a Gentile but a Jewish woman. She will serve the Almighty God the Maker of heaven and earth. And she will die and be buried in the same place as her mother-in-law. She finish her words off by a promise to God confessing that He can punish her if she doesn't remain faithful to her mother-in-law!

To us this might only sound like words but actually it is insightful words with extraordinary value and depth, and with life changing consequences. Ruth became the first Jewish convert in the history of Judaism. Later Judaism used her example for a Jewish convert formula

whereby all Gentile women who wanted to become Jewish would be tested three times to see if they were really serious about their intention to become Jewish.

Sermon (Andre):

The text verse: ¹⁶ But Ruth replied, “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.”

Ruth literally gave up her whole existence, her culture, her people and her future by going with her mother-in-law. She chose and committed to stay with her mother-in-law no matter what. She had all the reasons in the world to walk away. She was not from Judah, and she had no blood responsibility to her mother-in-law. She could have just stayed in her own country, and lead an easy, uncomplicated life.

But three times Naomi sent Ruth home and three times she refused to leave. Ruth was determined to go with Naomi. Yes, she insisted that she will not let her mother-in-law go without her.

Ruth did everything she could to make life easy for Naomi, and in the end Ruth gave Naomi a bright new future by marrying a blood relative of the family, named Boaz, and changed their destiny through the birth of a son – Obed - the grandfather of king David!

Ruth made a choice to love and a commitment to make it work despite all the consequences, regardless of all the sacrifices she had to make.

What does the story of Ruth mean to us?

Every day we find ourselves on difficult journeys with difficult decisions. But in each and every journey we have a choice. We can either listen to God, take his hand and go with him. Or we can ignore Him and decide to go on our own.

Ruth came to the Jewish faith late in her life. But she was committed to follow God. Nothing deterred her from journeying with God.

And God was always there. She did not suddenly declare that she “gave her heart” to God. No, God made her heart and He had her heart anyway. All she did was to tune in her heart to the “heart of God”, pulsing with love. All she did was noticing that God was in control.

The story of Ruth tells us how God operates. He is always in control, always ahead of us, calling us in daylight or even in the middle of the night.

He is always ahead of all our journeys. He is in control despite the actions of human beings.

Ruth trusted the Almighty God and became a powerful instrument in his hand.

A few years ago, I stood on this pulpit thinking seriously about the journey ahead, leading a vacant congregation in difficult circumstances. I knew that the journey was going to be long but I never thought it would be so long – three years.

And to be quite honest, when I said on that first day that God already knew who your next minister will be, it never crossed my mind for one second that the new minister would be my beloved wife!

Because my beloved wife had her own ideas. She told me at that time, that she is now a full time mum and that being a mum is much harder work than being a minister!

Like Ruth, I knew that God had a plan for the congregations. Through many trials and tribulations, He showed each one of us that He is in control, moving in mysterious ways in the hearts of people, going before us in meetings, leading us and guiding us.

And then, after a year, the congregations were allowed to call their minister. And then of course, very quickly I had to intervene when a lot of very enthusiastic people started frantically to prepare the Manse for a minister who would appear almost in a flash. I had to say to people: "wait". Wait for God's time. His time is not ours. We have to journey patiently, waiting for His direction.

But after another year of vacancy, people started getting tired, anxious and even annoyed. Why is it taking so long? Why could the nomination committee not move quicker? Look around in Presbytery - there are congregations who started with their vacancy procedures well after us and they already have a new minister in the Manse?

But again God showed us all. It was His journey with the congregations of West Kirk and Polbeth Harwood. He was preparing us for his chosen servant...

And when Nanda said YES to God's call, a lot of people have said, the journey has ended. But I have news for you - your journey with God's chosen servant has just begun. Like Ruth, she is committed to lead you, help you and encourage you to journey anew with God.

You now have a new responsibility too. You have to respect God's choice and work with her. You have to look after His chosen servant and prepare yourselves for her ministry. You have to be patient when she leads you in a different direction. You have to be forgiving when she makes difficult decisions. You have to be loving when she needs your love and acceptance. You have to listen carefully to God speaking through her at all times... West Calder and Polbeth Harwood may not be Moab or South Africa. She may be different in her leadership style, she may talk softer (than I do!) and she may have funny ideas. The thing that really matters is that God called her. So help her. Give her your support and journey with her, despite your own preferences and ideas about how you think a new minister should be.

And Nanda – take God's hand and know that His Holy Spirit will guide you in all that you say, do or think as you minister to your flock here in West Calder and Polbeth Harwood....

Response (Nanda):

I asked Andre to use this text for preaching me in, because Ruth speaks to me on so many levels.

Naomi needed someone to give her life direction, and God sent her Ruth. Naomi didn't see Ruth as God's answer to her prayers at first. To Naomi Ruth was just a foreigner, her daughter-in-law. But then, through

the choices she made, Ruth became Naomi's daughter, one of her own. Naomi then saw God's hand in their relationship, and their lives together had a happy ending.

I am also just a foreigner, here in your land, but I chose to come here, just like Ruth did, because I believe God called me here. Thank you for accepting me as one of your own. All I can ask for, is that by working here, alongside you, to the glory of God, our story will also one day have a happy ending.

So, people of the West Kirk of Calder / Polbeth Harwood Church – from today onwards, where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people, your problems will be my problems, and your joys will be my joys... Because we already belong to the same God, who is our Father, which makes us family.

Amen