

Taking Risks

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 17 January 2016

Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 00] Now, for our Bible reading, we're returning to the book of Ruth, and this time to chapter 3. The young woman from Moab, who had been widowed, had come back, had come to Bethlehem with her mother-in-law Naomi, who was also widowed. She'd been greatly helped by a relative of Naomi called Boaz, a rich man who had allowed her to glean in his fields, and now chapter 3 carries on the story.

So, Ruth chapter 3, reading from verse 1. Then Naomi, Ruth's mother-in-law, said to her, My daughter, should I not seek rest for you, that it may be well with you?

Is not Boaz our relative, with whose young woman you were? See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. Wash, therefore, anoint yourself, put on your cloak, and go down to the threshing floor, but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking.

When he lies down, observe the place where he lies, then go and uncover his feet and lie down, and he will tell you what to do. And Ruth replied, All that you say, I will do.

So she went down to the threshing floor, and did just as her mother-in-law had commanded her. And when Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain.

[1 : 33] Then she came softly and uncovered his feet and lay down. At midnight, the man was startled and turned over. And behold, a woman lay at his feet.

He said, Who are you? And she answered, I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer. And he said, May you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter.

You have made this last kindness greater than the first, and that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. And now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you all that you ask.

For all my fellow townsmen know that you are a worthy woman. And now it is true that I am a redeemer. Yet there is a redeemer nearer than I. Remain tonight, and in the morning, if he will redeem you, good.

Let him do it. But if he is not willing to redeem you, then as the Lord lives, I will redeem you. Lie down until the morning. So she lay at his feet until the morning.

[2 : 39] But he arose before one could recognize another. And he said, Let it not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor. He said, Bring the garment you are wearing and hold it out.

So she held it, and he measured out six measures of barley and put it on her. Then she went into the city. And she came to her mother-in-law. And Naomi said, How did you fare, my daughter?

Then Ruth told her all the man had done for her, saying, These six measures of barley he gave to me. For he said to me, You must not go back empty-handed to your mother-in-law.

And she replied, Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out. For the man will not rest, but will settle the matter today. Amen.

Amen. That is the word of the Lord. Now, if you would please turn to page 223 again to chapter 3 of Ruth.

[3 : 42] And we'll have a moment of prayer. Amen. God, our Father, as we turn from the praising of your name to the preaching of your word, I ask that you will take my words in all their imperfection, that you will use them faithfully to unfold the written word.

And so lead us to the living word, the Lord Christ himself, in whose name we pray. Amen. Jonathan was on his way to church.

He was very proud of his new sports car, which he had just got that week. And he was very sorry it was raining heavily. And as he drove out of his garage and turned into the main road, he saw just yards down the road at a bus stop three people standing whom he knew very well.

They all went to his church. One of them was little Mrs. Roberts. She suffered terribly from arthritis and rain made it worse.

The other one was Dr. Fosdick. And Jonathan owed him a special debt. He had come back from Africa with a dreadful tropical disease. And Dr. Fosdick had more or less saved his life.

[5 : 12] And the third person at the bus stop was Amanda. Amanda had just come to church a few months ago. Jonathan was madly in love with her. But he had never plucked up courage to speak to her.

As he drew near the bus stop, he looked at the solitary passenger seat. He had only seconds to make up his mind. But it was enough.

He drew up at the bus stop with a triumphant screech of brakes, jumped up, helped little Mrs. Roberts into the passenger seat, handed the keys to Dr. Fosdick, and huddled under the brolly with Amanda, hoping that the number eight bus would be even later than usual.

And the point of the story? The point of the story is that Providence placed Amanda at the bus stop. But Jonathan had to do something about it. And that leads us very directly into this story here.

Providence had brought Ruth to Bethlehem. Providence had put Boaz in her sights. Providence had ensured that Boaz was someone whom Naomi knew well.

[6 : 25] But the character still had to do something about it. This is the turning point of the book. Once again, it's a brilliant story in its own right.

Dialogue, action, an atmosphere of mystery, a story of suspense. Indeed, it ends on a note of suspense. It takes place during one night.

Chapter one had taken about ten years. Chapter two, most of it in one summer afternoon, and then the seven or eight weeks following. This chapter takes place in one night at a threshing floor.

So that's the first thing, a brilliantly told story, a story of providence and a story of human action in response to providence.

Now, the other thing to notice is the mention of the Redeemer. Ruth was told by Naomi, that Boaz is one of our Redeemers, sometimes called Kinsman Redeemer.

[7 : 30] In ancient Israel, if people got into debt or into economic slavery, it was the duty of these people, the Kinsman Redeemer, to buy them out.

And Boaz had already showed himself well disposed and friendly on the harvest field. But it's not just handouts. This is about genuine relationships.

And above all, it's a story of taking risks. This is what I've called this evening's sermon, taking risks. Life is about risks, isn't it?

Life is about making decisions, and we don't always know what will happen. So let's look then at the story as it develops. And first of all, we have a daring plan, verses 1 to 7, where Naomi takes a risky initiative.

Clearly, Naomi has decided, Ruth must marry Boaz. That will secure her future. It will give her a home, and probably there will be children from that marriage.

[8 : 37] But you know, the plan could have misfired very, very badly. I mean, at the very least, Boaz could have said no. Or he might have been shocked at Ruth's unconventional behavior.

Now, if you read the commentators on this, you get a whole spectrum as always. At one end of the spectrum, there are the ultra-pious, who say that Naomi was a godly woman who had clearly prayed very hard about this.

The other end of the spectrum, we are told, we have two-shoes shameless women, a scheming and manipulative older woman, and a shameless young woman who practically throws herself at Boaz.

Now, which is true? And I'm going to suggest that neither of you is true, because this is a story of mixed motives.

Think about it. We often, perhaps most of the time, have mixed motives. We genuinely want to do good. We genuinely want to help people.

[9 : 46] Let's not kid ourselves. Very often we do that because it makes us feel good. And it's as much about us as about the people we're helping. And of course, we want people to know about it.

We want everyone to know about our good deeds, don't we? We want to do our good deeds before men. And Jesus said, we don't do your good deeds before men.

Wesley says, do good by stealth. So, now, I'm not talking about anybody else here. I know the fickleness of my own heart.

And I know my own mixed motives very well. And what Jeremiah said, the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked.

Who can understand it? And then goes on to say, I, the Lord, search the heart. So, what I'm suggesting is this is a story of mixed motives.

[10 : 41] Neither a very godly woman praying nor a manipulative and scheming woman. But something in between. In other words, this is a story about a real human being.

And I'd be very surprised if we don't recognize ourselves in that. I certainly recognize myself in the whole question of mixed motives. Don't rely on our feelings.

Remember the wonderful words in 1 John. Whenever our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts. And he knows all things.

Some ways that's terrifying, isn't it? God knows all things. In other ways, it's enormously comforting. Sometimes, in our mixed motives and in our attempt to justify ourselves, we don't quite understand what it's all about.

But God does. And God is kind. So I think we can say Naomi genuinely wanted to do the best for Ruth. There's no doubt about that. On the other hand, she is the kind of person who would like to manage others.

[11 : 47] That can be a real danger. We are called to do good. Which does not mean we are called to be do-gooders. There's a huge difference, you know. Doing good is genuinely caring for the person.

Do-gooding is assuming we always know best. Particularly in this area, how much matchmaking goes on in Christian circles? Well, it didn't just happen today.

It's happening here. This is matchmaking. The trouble is, why could Naomi not have achieved the same result by speaking quietly to Boaz? She could have a quiet word with him.

After all, he was a relative. She presumably knew him well. But no, she decides on this risky plan. She meddles. I think Naomi was essentially a meddler. Doesn't it mean she was a bad woman?

She was a well-disposed woman wanting to do the right thing. But she meddled. We are called to help and support, but not to run people's lives for them.

[12 : 49] Not to manipulate. There's a lot of circumstantial detail. There's the wash there for anoint yourself. Put on your cloak, or perhaps put on your best clothes. The word is, the word has that kind of nuance about it.

What's wrong with that? Some people found that rather seedy. After all, if you're going to meet somebody whom you think might be, might be the right person for you, washing and dressing well is not a bad start.

Very, very human story, isn't it? A story of a woman who genuinely wanted to do well, and yet a story of a woman who was a meddler.

I think it's also encouraging, isn't it? Even when we get it wrong, even when we meddle where we shouldn't, even when we try to help God out, he still works his purpose out.

Because this is the problem with all of us, isn't it? We think we can give advice people, we give advice to God. Or like Emperor Frederick of Prussia who once said, had I been present on the day of creation, I would have given some very useful advice.

[14 : 03] Now, sometimes I think we feel that about the Lord. We can give him very useful advice. So that's the first thing then, a daring plan, very risky plan. Indeed, I've said some people think it's risky, but I think that's reading too much into the text.

Just as, as I said, there's the over-pious reaction and there is the over-seedy reaction, and both are wrong. We have a life-changing meeting, verses 8 to 13.

Atmosphere of mystery is built up. You notice how in verse 6, it's simply the man and the woman, which I think is universalizing this story. This specific story is universalized.

There is darkness, there is midnight, and again, there is suspense. How will Boaz react? We know he's a generous, kindly man.

We know he is a good man. On the other hand, this is not exactly, I'm sure, what he was expecting. The end of the harvest, the time of feasting, and by the way, once again, some commentators who are over-critical, verse 7, Boaz had eaten and drunk and his heart was merry.

[15 : 17] Boaz was not drunk. Boaz had enjoyed a good meal and he was happy. Obviously happy. The harvest had gone well. It was all safely gathered in and he has just enjoyed a good meal.

It doesn't mean he was drunk or anything like that. And here, Ruth shows the initiative. She said in verse 5, All that you say, I will do.

That's not entirely what happens, is it? She takes the initiative. And in effect, in verse 9, she proposes marriage. I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant for your redeemer.

Perhaps I should have called this sermon a message for leap year. There you go. He virtually proposes marriage to him. Clearly, she had judged her man properly.

Because, if you look at verse 9 again, Spread your wings over your servant. Just glance across the page at verse 12, chapter 2. A full reward will be given you by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have taken refuge.

[16 : 27] She echoes those words, showing she has come to trust in the Lord during these times. As I said last week, we don't know if there's love at first sight, or the gradual dawning and growing of love, but, obviously, the Lord's have been working in both their hearts.

And, while, let's say, she virtually proposes, she is very polite. She calls herself servant. Now, this is not a model to follow.

It's not saying, if you're looking for a husband, you put on your glad rags and go to a threshing floor. That is not what this passage is saying. What it is saying, though, is that the Lord works through local customs, manners, and so on.

When they're, I mean, they don't mean the Lord approves of everything that's done or everything that's done is right. All I'm saying is the Lord comes right down into human circumstances. That's what incarnation is about.

The Word became flesh and lived among us. And this is where, and all these stories in the Old Testament showing the eternal God intervening, coming down into human life is a preparation for that.

[17 : 45] So, as you can see, it's a very human story of love to people who had fallen in love. And it's obvious that Boaz is in love as well. Verse 10, he said, May you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter.

Daughter does not necessarily mean he is a lot older than her. He'll be a bit older than her because he's probably more in Naomi's generation than Ruth.

You have made, but note, you've made this last kindness great in the first. You've not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. He's always a bit older. Ruth is clearly very attractive.

And he is very nervous that she'll be attracted to some younger man rather than to him. So, it's a human story. A story of a man and a woman who've fallen in love.

Just as the Song of Songs is such a story, but just as the Song of Songs also has a story behind the story, it's a real story of human love, but you mustn't make into an allegory.

[18 : 47] However, if you read Ezekiel chapter 16, when you go home, a prince finds an abandoned baby girl and he throws his cloak over her, takes her home, and eventually marries her.

This is a story of the great love of our God who went into the far country to search for his bride, takes her home, eventually marries.

This is the love story of God and his people. As we'll sing at the end of the service, Jesus, our surety, our kinsman redeemer, round us the robe of his righteousness flings.

You see, it's not, it's a human story or it's an allegory of God's love. It is both because God is the great lover. And this metaphor of clothing starts at the very beginning of the Bible, at the gates of Eden.

The Lord God makes cloaks of skin and covers Adam and Eve. Right through there is this theme until it culminates in the verse we sang from Augustine.

[20 : 01] Augustine was converted at reading the verse in Romans, put on the Lord Jesus Christ. That's the culmination of that. And then in the marriage of the Lamb, in the wedding of the Lamb, in the new creation, the bride is given robes of righteousness, robes of white.

So, the power of this story is because it's the very heart, the high road of the gospel. This isn't an interesting by-path.

This is the high road of the gospel because the essence of the gospel, and this is what makes it so different from every other faith that people have. On the one hand, it is a faith that transcends our understanding of God who is high and enthroned in heaven.

On the other hand, it's the story of that same God who comes right down into our circumstances, takes our flesh, and throws over us the robe of his righteousness.

And so we can read the story on these two levels, and we can rejoice in it in these two levels. We can rejoice that in our fickleness, in our mistakes, in our blunders, that Jesus, our kinsman-redeemer, on us the robe of his righteousness flings.

[21 : 21] So this is, I suppose, it's a rather successful first date, you would have to say. But there is a problem, and the last part of the chapter, verses 14 to 18, is unfinished business, or need beginning really in verse 12.

It is true that I am a redeemer, yet there is a redeemer nearer than I. Oh dear, what if it doesn't work out?

What if this other redeemer decides to do his duty? Now, the chapter ends on a note of suspense, and we'll have to wait on a note of suspense, because the next sermon on Ruth will not be until February, perhaps appropriately on St. Valentine's Day, as it happens.

I didn't derange for that to happen, but there it is, the Lord overrules in his providence. So, there is this unfinished business, this business that, is she, and as you can see as a story, if you were reading, if you're doing this as a series, say as a television series, obviously, there's a wonderful cliffhanger to end on.

You know, at this point, the credits would be coming up, the music would be rolling, and you'd be wondering what was going to happen. And, notice that Boaz is saying it's still not time to go public.

[22 : 52] Verse 15 said, let it not be known that you came to the feshing floor. Boaz is happy in her love, and there's no need to go, indeed, it would be wrong to go public at this point.

So, we have this cliffhanger. Will this relative do his duty, and if he does, what will happen to the story of Boaz and Ruth? Much more seriously, what will happen to the further story, which we'll look at then, the last word in the book to mention the first of the sermons of David?

because this is, once again, it's fitted into the whole Bible story because from this union is going to come David, and great David's greater son.

So, again, the story, this part of the story ends in providence. Verse 18, wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out. Now, we've come across that kind of phrase last week.

It doesn't mean just wait, and oh, something will work out, or I know something will turn up out of Mr. McCauberish idea. No, when we have a phrase like that, it means there is a higher hand at work.

[24 : 04] God had led them thus far, and he is not going to desert them now. But you see, there's still need for faith, the need for faith on the part of Boaz and Ruth, and you can imagine the suspense until chapter 4, until publicly the other redeemer says that he's not willing to do it.

Anyway, a higher hand is at work. He did not desert Ruth and Boaz. He will not desert us, and thus, we can trust him for all that's to come, just as we praise him for all that is past.

Amen. Let's pray. God of the progress of history, the rise and fall of nations and empires, God who controls the motions of the stars, and yet the God who comes right down into our daily lives, cares for our relationships, cares for our problems, cares for people, and leads them in the path of his will.

We pray indeed that we will trust in you that as we face another week with all its unknown pathway ahead of us, that we may indeed walk hand in hand with you and trust in you for how these matters will turn out.

We ask this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.