

# **Unbreakable. Unstoppable, Extravagant Love!**

**Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> November 2018  
West Epping Uniting Church**

**Ruth 1:1-18**

**Rev John Barr**



The Book of Ruth finds its place wedged between the Book of Judges and the Books of Samuel in a section of the Hebrew Bible concerning the early history of Israel's settlement in Canaan. Ruth is a tiny book with only four chapters and a total of just 2,500 words. You could easily read it in one sitting. This compares with the Book of Judges that runs for 21 chapters and the Books of I and II Samuel that run for a total of 55 chapters.

Moreover, the Book of Ruth concerns just one rather insignificant family who does it pretty tough. Ruth is a poor, simple woman, not a queen or ruler of any kind. Ruth is not a judge or a general. Neither does she receive supernatural words of prophecy. Ruth does not witness any miracles of the kind we see in the lives of Moses, Elijah or Daniel.

So why bother about Ruth? Why is Ruth included in the canon of scripture? Well, there are numerous reasons and I have set aside this Sunday and next Sunday to focus on what we will soon see to be a remarkable story.

During the time of the Judges (we are talking about a period more than 3,000 years ago) a serious famine hit the land. Elimelech and his wife, Naomi, together with their two sons leave their home town of Bethlehem and migrate to land of Moab (which is now part of modern-day Jordan).

Now, this was a pretty risky thing to do. The Moabites were considered to be a rather suspicious crowd. Indeed, Israel and Moab were not the best of friends. The tensions went back to the time of Abraham and Lot. You may know that Lot split up with Abraham. After the devastation of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the loss of Lot's wife as she turned into a pillar of salt, Lot's family line is continued through a nasty case of incest. Here two of Lot's daughters become pregnant to their father. The eldest gives birth to Moab and the seedy story goes on.

(2)



Despite the murkiness of Moab's beginnings, Elimelech's sons marry local girls. Mahlon marries Ruth and Chilion marries Orpah – and if this reminds you of Oprah Winfrey then you are right – Oprah Winfrey was actually named “Orpah” after the biblical Ruth's sister. But over the years people mispronounced it and Orpah became Oprah Winfrey!

But tragedy hits the family. Naomi's husband, Elimelech dies. Then the husbands of Ruth and Orpah die. It's a disaster. The absence of husbands removes all forms of social security while there is no way of having children and perpetuating the family line.

After all this tragedy Naomi decides to return home. The famine has lifted in Bethlehem and the barley harvest is about to begin. Her two daughters are advised to remain in their home country of Moab and to start again – to go back to their own mothers and remarry.

But Ruth has none of this. She clings to Naomi and commits herself to travelling with her mother-in-law. Now the verb “to cling” used here is a powerful one. It's the same word used in Genesis that describes the very reason why men leave their fathers and mothers and “cling” to their wives in marriage, becoming one flesh.

In such a context Ruth speaks these wonderful words:

*'Do not press me to leave you  
or to turn back from following you!  
Where you go, I will go;  
where you lodge, I will lodge;  
your people shall be my people,  
and your God my God.  
Where you die, I will die—  
there will I be buried.  
May the LORD do thus and so to me,  
and more as well,  
if even death parts me from you!'*

(3)

Ruth announces to Naomi that she will stay with her - in this life and even as life ends. Moreover, Ruth will die with Naomi and will be buried with her. These are quite incredible words coming from a person who, as a widow, has little or no status, and, as a Moabite, is despised and looked down upon by the very people in whose country she will now go.

Moreover, Ruth commits herself to the God of Israel and to dying and being buried in a foreign land. This was a big deal for many ancient people as it is for many people today. The land in which one is conceived and born is of utmost spiritual significance. It is often linked to one's stake in the eternal. To forfeit this and to take on a new religion was and is, a big step!

But Ruth persists. Ruth's constant companionship, her Moabite nationality, her Moabite faith, her death, her burial, indeed her complete future is offered, no strings attached, to Naomi. And Naomi is obviously quite overcome. Naomi now keeps quiet as she, together with Ruth, make their way to Bethlehem.

A new, amazing chapter in Ruth's life opens – as we will learn more about this next week.



Friends, the story of Ruth thus far, is all about devotion, loyalty and love. The Hebrew word used to describe this is "hesed". It refers to an unbreakable, unstoppable, extravagant love that is attributed to God and to God's embracing of God's people. "Hesed", in a real sense, refers to a love that is excessive, extravagant and completely undeserved. It is foundational to our understanding of grace.

The biblical character, Ruth, embodies this. A lowly, despised Moabite widow models, quite beautifully, this fundamental character of God. And in doing so Ruth not only offers us a way of understanding the God we worship, Ruth also offers us a way in which we are to approach, interact and live with others.

If you are looking for an even more profound statement of this just turn to today's Gospel reading – Mark 12:28-34, where, on being asked what is the greatest of all commandments, Jesus replies:

(4)

*'The first is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." The second is this, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these.'*

I shall be saying more about this text later today when I preach during Radhika's Closure of Ministry Service.

Friends we live in a world where the example of Ruth and the kind of loving kindness Ruth models is surely lacking. The blatant murder of the Saudi journalist, Jamal Khashoggi, and the brutal attempts to silence critics of oppressive regimes around the world come to mind. There is the horrific targeting of Christians in Pakistan and Egypt and the rising tide of anti-Semitism as evidenced in the shocking attack on a synagogue in Pittsburgh last week.

Here in Australia there has been sexist slurs and racists smears, some of which have even been voiced in parliament by people elected to represent us. Those in government and those desiring to be in government constantly play to public fears and the hip-pocket nerve rather than addressing issues that have long-term implications for each one of us, for our grandchildren and our great grandchildren.

In our own lives we foster a hardness of heart towards others and we often turn a blind eye to those vulnerable groups in our community who are singled out, attacked and are deeply wounded.

Ruth offered her mother-in-law an unbreakable, unstoppable, extravagant love. This is no small thing. For it points so eloquently to the God we adore and worship. It points so profoundly to the God who calls each one of us to be God's people. In this, we can say quite confidently - that God reaches out to us, God accepts us and God loves us – no matter what.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, let us then do the same to others - as we love the Lord our God with all our hearts, with all our souls, with all our minds and with all our strength - may we also love our neighbours as ourselves.

Amen.

