

Sunday February 28th: Ruth: [Ruth 1: 1-18](#): 'Your people will be my people'

A few years ago, one of my brothers sent off a DNA swab to get an idea of our family's ethnic origins. The result showed that while just over 80% of our origins are 'British and Irish'; we are apparently 8.8% Iberian, 6.2% Eastern European, 3.6% Ashkenazi Jewish and 0.8% Finnish. The Iberian ethnicity is explained by the fact that between 4,000 and 5,000 years ago, a time when there were only a few thousand inhabitants in the British Isles, Iberian fishermen migrated from what is now Spain across the Bay of Biscay and are now thought of as the indigenous inhabitants of Britain. It is a reminder that every single one of us is descended from people who migrated here from somewhere else. Some of these migrations were for economic reasons (the Windrush generation), others came as invaders (Romans, Vikings and Normans) and others came as refugees, fleeing persecution and poverty (Huguenots). This perspective should profoundly inform and shape our response to migration today. The fact that migrants, many of whom never wanted to leave their homes but were compelled to do so by conflict and poverty, often find themselves confronted by barbed wire and the message, 'you are not welcome here, go back home' is both unbiblical and a denial of our own ethnic origins.



Street corner in Bethlehem

I write this just days after yet another family doing exactly what Ruth did lost their lives. Rasoul Iran-Nejad, his wife Shiva Mohammad Panahi and their children Anita, Armin and Artin, having fled Iranian Kurdistan, drowned in the English Channel trying to join family in the UK. Ethnic Kurds are a minority group in a number of Middle Eastern countries including Iran. Every day they face discriminatory underfunding and those who protest about their situation are liable to find themselves facing arrest, torture and death. Rasoul and Shiva wanted to reach Britain and put their lives in the hands of one of the many criminal

gangs who put people in overcrowded, unsafe boats to cross the Channel and don't give them another thought. They were desperate to find somewhere to bring up their children without the constant threat of violence.

We have all been made aware the dreadful conditions in which many migrants live, whether they have taken the decision to flee their home countries or, like the Rohingya Muslims of Myanmar, been forced out at the point of a gun. If we want to read the book of Ruth and hear God speak to us through it, we will find ourselves unable to close our hearts to the urgency of the need. Naomi, Ruth's mother-in-law and her family were themselves economic migrants as desperate as their contemporary counterparts to flee famine and poverty.

The opening verse of the book of Ruth provides us with its setting in 'the days when the Judges ruled' (v 1). We already know that this was a time of instability and fairly constant conflict. Well, it was if we consider the stories of Israel's leaders anything to go by. The movingly beautiful story of Ruth reminds us that we mustn't overlook, in any society at any time, the stories of ordinary people trying to live their lives and do the right thing in difficult circumstances; another perspective to take into account in considering migration today. The picture of Bethlehem reflected in this story is of a place where people can find a home, look out for one another and talk to one another when issues, such as who will take the responsibility of a 'kinsman-redeemer' in marrying Ruth, come up.

One important detail easy to miss as we read between the lines is that at the beginning of the book, they found hospitality and shelter in Moab (a traditional enemy of Israel), so much so that Naomi's sons both married Moabite wives. And following the tragic deaths of all of their husbands Naomi and her two daughters-in-law share a moving conversation that takes up the second half of our reading. It is framed around the 'hesed', the loving kindness of God that Naomi wishes both Ruth and Orpah to experience. Whilst Orpah decides that she belongs back with her own people (and is not in any way judged for this), Ruth feels that she belongs with Naomi and her people. This sense of belonging goes beyond just living in a particular community. When Ruth says to Naomi that, 'your people will be my people and your God my God.' (v 16), she is expressing her total commitment to her new community. This is not saying that she would have been judged if she had not committed herself to Israel's God and is not therefore a proof text telling us that when today's refugees arrive at our shores, they should immediately adopt our cultural norms.

What it is saying is that there is something beautiful about Ruth's loyalty to her mother-in-law and the deep love that existed between them. They are two women who both know what it is like to lose loved ones and leave their homes and in this conversation, we see them exploring personal loyalty and what it means to belong in ways that change their lives. In the case of Ruth, it brings her to Boaz who goes the extra mile to protect her and eventually marries her. So from what perspective do we see those who have had to leave their homes and communities? How can we seek to protect and provide hospitality to the most vulnerable members of the communities in which we live and the wider world we are part of? How can we express the 'hesed', the loving kindness of God, to those who find themselves grieving for the loss of home and family? Our response could involve giving, campaigning and action. We might want to support an organisation such as the aptly named Boaz Trust (www.boaztrust.org.uk) working with destitute asylum seekers in Greater Manchester. Christian Aid (www.christianaid.org.uk) works with refugees around the world.

Many people today, for all sorts of reasons, turn their back on refugees and migrants as if it's 'nothing to do with me'. Followers of Jesus cannot do that because that is not what he did. He stopped at the gate of Jericho for Bartimaeus (who we will meet again later), a blind man who had been excluded from his community and was begging on the streets. In doing so he cut right across those who were telling him to shut up and go away and, in loving him and healing him, demonstrated exactly the loving kindness we see in the book of Ruth. Jesus stopped; think about that. He stopped when he could have acceded to the crowd's wishes and carried on out of the city. We too need to stop and hear the voices of those who are leaving home because their homes have been destroyed, who are drowning trying to cross the English Channel and who feel that nobody wants to offer them hospitality, welcome and a place to belong. In doing that we may need to think through how far we have come in overcoming our own inborn prejudices because those who end up far from home are, in an important sense, as much family as our own loved ones.

Questions: How have we responded to the needs of those who have become refugees? What more could we do?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you yourself were a refugee in Egypt and know what it is like to have to leave home. Help us to open our hearts to the victims of war and poverty and help them, through the compassion and loving kindness of strangers like us, find, like Ruth, a place to belong. Amen.