

Ruth Exposition by Maclaren

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A GENTLE HEROINE, A GENTILE CONVERT

'And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: 17. Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me. 18. When she saw that she was stedfastly minded to go with her, then she left speaking unto her. 19. So they two went until they came to Bethlehem. And it came to pass, when they were come to Beth-lehem, that all the city was moved about them, and they said, Is this Naomi? 20. And she said unto them, Call me not Naomi, call me Mare: for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me. 21. I went out full, and the Lord hath brought me home again empty: why then call ye me Naomi, seeing the Lord hath testified against me, and the Almighty hath afflicted me! 22. So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter in law, with her, which returned out of the country of Moab: and they came to Bethlehem in the beginning of barley harvest.' —

Ruth 1:16-22

THE lovely idyl of Ruth is in sharp contrast with the bloody and turbulent annals of Judges. It completes, but does not contradict, these, and happily reminds us of what we are apt to forget in reading such pages, that no times are so wild but that in them are quiet corners, green oases, all the greener for their surroundings, where life glides on in peaceful isolation from the tumult. Men and women love and work and weep and laugh, the gossips of Bethlehem talk over Naomi's return ('they said,' in verse 19, is feminine), Boaz stands among his corn, and no sounds of war disturb them. Thank God! the blackest times were not so dismal in reality as they look in history. There are clefts in the grim rock, and flowers blooming, sheltered in the clefts. The peaceful pictures of this little book, multiplied many thousand times, have to be set as a background to the lurid pictures of the Book of Judges.

The text begins in the middle of Naomi's remonstrance with her two daughters-in-law. We need not deal with the former part of the conversation, nor follow Orpah as she goes back to her home and her gods. She is the first in the sad series of those, 'not far from the kingdom of God,' who needed but a little more resolution at the critical moment, and, for want of it, shut themselves out from the covenant, and sank back to a world which they had half renounced.

So these two lonely widows are left, each seeking to sacrifice herself for the other. Who shall decide which was the more noble and truly womanly in her self-forgetfulness, — the elder, sadder heart, which strove to secure for the other some joy and fellowship at the price of its own deepened solitude; or the younger, which steeled itself against entreaties, and cast away friends and country for love's sweet sake? We rightly praise Ruth's vow, but we should not forget Naomi's unselfish pleading to be left to tread her weary path alone.

Ruth's passionate burst of tenderness is immortal. It has put into fitting words for all generations the deepest thoughts of loving hearts, and comes to us over all the centuries between, as warm and living as when it welled up from that gentle, heroic soul. The two strongest emotions of our nature are blended in it, and each gives a portion of its fervour — love and religion. So closely are they interwoven that it is difficult to allot to each its share in the united stream; but, without trying to determine to which of them the greater part of its volume and force is due, and while conscious of the danger of spoiling such words by comments weaker than themselves, we may seek to put into distinct form the impressions which they make.

We see in them the heroism of gentleness. Put the sweet figure of the Moabitess beside the heroes of the Book of Judges, and we feel the contrast. But is there anything in its pages more truly heroic than her deed, as she turned her back on the blue hills of Moab, and chose the joyless lot of the widowed companion of a widow aged and poor, in a land of strangers, the enemies of her country and its gods? It is easier far to rush on the spears of the foe, amid the whirl and excitement of battle, than to choose with open eyes so dreary a lifelong path. The gentleness of a true woman covers a courage of the patient, silent sort, which, in its meek steadfastness, is nobler than the contempt of personal danger, which is vulgarly called bravery. It is harder to endure than to strike. The supreme type of heroic, as of all, virtue is Jesus Christ, whose gentleness was the velvet glove on the iron hand of an inflexible will. Of that best kind of heroes there are few brighter examples, even in the annals of the Church which numbers its virgin martyrs by the score, than this sweet figure of Ruth, as the eager vow comes from her young lips, which had already tasted sorrow, and were ready to drink its bitterest cup at the call of duty. She may well teach us to rectify our judgments, and to recognise the quiet heroism of many a modest life of uncomplaining suffering. Her example has a special message to women, and exhorts them to see to it that, in the cultivation of the so-called womanly excellence of gentleness, they do not let it run into weakness, nor, on the other

hand, aim at strength, to the loss of meekness. The yielding birch-tree, the 'lady of the woods,' bends in all its elastic branches and tossing ringlets of foliage to the wind; but it stands upright after storms that level oaks and pines. God's strength is gentle strength, and ours is likest His when it is meek and lowly, like that of the 'strong Son of God.'

Ruth's great words may suggest, too, the surrender which is the natural language of true love. Her story comes in among all these records of bloodshed and hate, like a bit of calm blue sky among piles of ragged thunder-clouds, or a breath of fresh air in the oppressive atmosphere of a slaughter-house. Even in these wild times there was still a quiet corner where love could spread his wings. The question has often been asked, what the purpose of the Book of Ruth is, and various answers have been given. The genealogical table at the end, showing David's descent from her, the example which it supplies of the reception of a Gentile into Israel, and other reasons for its presence in Scripture, have been alleged, and, no doubt, correctly. But the Bible is a very human book, just because it is a divine one; and surely it would be no unworthy object to enshrine in its pages a picture of the noble working of that human love which makes so much of human life. The hallowing of the family is a distinct purpose of the Old Testament, and the beautiful example which this narrative gives of the elevating influence of domestic affection entitles it to a place in the canon. How many hearts, since Ruth spoke her vow, have found in it the words that fitted their love best! How often they have been repeated by quivering lips, and heard as music by loving ears! How solemn, and even awful, is that perennial freshness of words which came hot and broken by tears, from lips that have long ago mouldered into dust! What has made them thus 'enduring for ever,' is that they express most purely the self-sacrifice which is essential to all noble love. The very inmost longing of love is to give itself away to the object beloved. It is not so much a desire to acquire as to bestow, or, rather, the antithesis of giving and receiving melts into one action which has a twofold motion, — one outwards, to give; one inwards, to receive. To love is to give one's self away, therefore all lesser givings are its food and delight; and, when Ruth threw herself on Naomi's withered breast, and sobbed out her passionate resolve, she was speaking the eternal language of love, and claiming Naomi for her own, in the very act of giving herself to Naomi. Human love should be the parent of all self-sacrificing as of all heroic virtues; and in our homes we do not live in love, as we ought, unless it leads us to the daily exercise of self-suppression and surrender, which is not felt to be loss but the natural expression of our love, which it would be a crime against it, and a pain to ourselves, to withhold. If Ruth's temper lived in our families, they would be true 'houses of God' and 'gates of heaven.'

We hear in Ruth's words also that forsaking of all things which is an essential of all true religion. We have said that it was difficult to separate, in the words, the effects of love to Naomi from those of adoption of Naomi's faith. Apparently Ruth's adhesion to the worship of Jehovah was originally due to her love for her mother-in-law. It is in order to be one with her in all things that she says, 'Thy God shall be my God.' And it was because Jehovah was Naomi's God that Ruth chose Him for hers. But whatever the origin of her faith, it was genuine and robust enough to bear the strain of casting Chemosh and the gods of Moab behind her, and setting herself with full purpose of heart to seek the Lord. Abandoning them was digging an impassable gulf between herself and all her past, with its friendships, loves, and habits. She is one of the first, and not the least noble, of the long series of those who 'suffer the loss of all things, and count them but dung, that they may win' God for their dearest treasure. We have seen how, in her, human love wrought self-sacrifice. But it was not human love alone that did it. The cord that drew her was twisted of two strands, and her love to Naomi melted into her love of Naomi's God. Blessed they who are drawn to the knowledge and love of the fountain of all love in heaven by the sweetness of the characters of His representatives in their homes, and who feel that they have learned to know God by seeing Him in dear ones, whose tenderness has revealed His, and whose gracious words have spoken of His grace! If Ruth teaches us that we must give up all, in order truly to follow the Lord, the way by which she came to her religion may teach us how great are the possibilities, and consequently the duties, of Christians to the members of their own families. If we had more elder women like Naomi, we should have more younger women like Ruth.

The self-sacrifice which is possible and blessed, even to inferior natures, at the bidding of love, is too precious to be squandered on earthly objects. Men's capacities for it, at the call of dear ones here, should be the rebuke of their grudging surrender to God. He gave the capacity that it might find its true field of operation in our relation to Him. But how much more ready we all are to give up everything for the sake of our Naomis than for His sake: and how we may be our own accusers, if the measure of our devotion to them be contrasted with the measure of our devotion to God!

Finally, we may see, in Ruth's entrance into the religion of Israel, a picture of what was intended to be the effect of Israel's relation with the Gentile world.

The household of Elimelech emigrated to Moab in a famine, and, whether that were right or wrong, they were there among heathens as Jehovah worshippers. They were meant to be missionaries, and, in Ruth's case, the purpose was fulfilled. She became the 'first-fruits of the Gentiles'; and one aim of the book, no doubt, is to show how the believing Gentile was to be incorporated into Israel. Boaz rejoices over her, and especially over her conversion, and prays, 'A full reward be given thee of Jehovah, the God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust.' She is married to him, and becomes the ancestress of David, and, through him, of the Messiah. All this is a beautiful completion to the other side of the picture which the fierce fighting in Judges makes prominent, and teaches that Israel's relation to the nations around was not to be one of mere antagonism, but that they had another mission than destruction, and were set in their land, as the candlestick in the Tabernacle, that light might stream

out into the darkness of the desert. The story of the Moabitess, whose blood flowed in David's veins, was a standing protest against the later narrow exclusiveness which called Gentiles 'dogs,' and prided itself on outward connection with the nation, in the exact degree in which it lost real union with the nation's God, and real understanding of the nation's mission.

We have left ourselves no space to speak of the remainder of this passage, which is of less importance. It gives us a lively picture of the stir in the little town of Bethlehem, as the two way-worn women came into it, in their strange attire, and attracting notice by travelling alone. As we have observed, 'they said,' in verse 19, is feminine. The women of the village buzzed round the strangers, as they sat in silence, perhaps by that well at the gate, of which, long after, David longed to drink. Wonder, curiosity, and possibly a spice of malice, mingle in the question, 'Is this Naomi?' It is heartless, at any rate; it had been better to have found them food and shelter than to have let them sit, the mark for sharp tongues. Naomi's bitter words seem to be moved partly by a sense of the coldness of the reception. She realises that she has indeed come back to a changed world, where there will be little sympathy except such as Ruth can give. It is with almost passion that she abjures her name 'Pleasant,' as a satire on her woful lot, and bids them call her 'Bitter,' as truer to fact now. The burst of sorrow is natural, as she finds herself again where she had been a wife and mother, and 'remembers happier things.' Her faith wavers, and her words almost reproach God. The exaggerations in which memory is apt to indulge colour them. 'I went out full.' She has forgotten that they 'went out' to seek for bread. She only remembers that four went away, and three sleep in Moab. Possibly she thinks of their emigration as a sin, and traces her dear ones deaths to God's displeasure on its account. His 'testifying' against her probably means that His providence in bereaving her witnessed to His disapprobation. But, whether that be so or not, her wild words are not those of a patient sufferer, who bows to His will. But true faith may sometimes break down, and Ruth's 'trusting under the wings of Jehovah' is proof enough that, in the long years of lonely sorrow, Naomi's example had shown how peaceful and safe was the shelter there.