

Harvest - Life changing moment

Why is the story of Ruth such an amazing story? Probably because it is such a surprising and unexpected story, with includes some really loving moments, which warm our heart. It could also be that it is a story that clearly enters the life of Jesus in more ways than one. And finally, because it is a challenge to the way we live our faith in this XXI century. What more could be want?

To fully grasp the story and its impact for our Harvest service, we have to go back in time, before Ruth even existed, without that we would never understand why it is such a life changing moment. In Deuteronomy 23 we are told about those people who are excluded from 'the Assembly of the Lord'. This is a dramatic list, but even more when we read verses 3-4: "*No Ammonite or **Moabite** shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD, because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you*". Why is this important? Because the very beginning of the book of Ruth sets the scene: famine, Bethlehem, and a family that moves to Moab to survive, and where the two sons marry Moabite women, one of them being Ruth. **AND THAT IS WHY IT IS IMPORTANT.**

The Moabites were cursed because they did not provide food to the people of God, now the people of God face a famine and live in Moab. And today we come across what goes on when Ruth and her mother in law, are in Bethlehem (which happens to mean: city of bread). Boaz who owns a field knows about Ruth's love and faithfulness for the family, which she doesn't know but he does, is his family. He invites Ruth to only gather on his field, Boaz has made sure she will be safe with the women that are working there, to take the water she needs, eat the food she needs, collect the grain she needs, and he has ordered the young men not to bother her (we all know what that means). And she is surprised by all this, because in her own words "**I am a foreigner**", and we might add, a foreigner they are supposed to have nothing to do with. This Harvest shows us what a life changing reality it is.

When everything was in place to support all forms of exclusion, rejection, racism... when all that could have been justified because it was "Law", Boaz is moved by Ruth's kindness, her commitment, her love for Naomi, and so all that could have been, has been changed because Boaz took another path, he chose to be guided by empathy. To feel empathy, we have to switch on our brain, to connect with our heart, and this is quite an exercise, and it need working on. But it doesn't come automatically, it needs determination to go beyond the logic, the tradition, the usual ways of doing things. And this is what happens in the narrative today.

Ruth was moved to connect with a new family, even expecting that history meant enmity. Naomi, was moved by the commitment of Ruth. Ruth is moved by the dedication of Boaz, and lives will be changed because of all this. We know how the story comes to an end, Ruth and Boaz are married, they have a child, born into the family living in Bethlehem: Obed, who becomes the father of Jesse, who becomes the father of David. And we then find Ruth, Obed, Jesse, and David in Matthew chapter 1, the genealogy of Jesus. Ruth the foreigner from the

despised Moabites is one of the three women mentioned in the list of Jesus' ancestors, that Ruth's story and David's story and Jesus' story meet in Bethlehem -the city of bread, and Jesus becomes the bread of life for the world. And having said all this, I find it amazing who easily it is to admire and respect Ruth, and yet immigrants (=foreigners in Ruth's words) as so easily despised and rejected. And clearly God's choice is on the side of immigrants, orphans and widows – so there is some confusion in lots of people on this, don't you agree?

And this is the lesson of Harvest. That harvest. This harvest. The reminder that in God's loving plans, life is transformed. What was hatred, should become love, what was impossible should become possible. That there are no longer foreigners. That sharing resources so all may find life, hope, reconciliation, peace. And this is one mighty challenge, in a world where discrimination, xenophobia, hatred can be found everywhere... foreigners are despised more and more, where refugees and immigrants are made to feel unwelcome. Empathy, which is what changed this story is so needed in the world today, so that we don't continue to reproduce the system of hatred, pain, sadness. This story of Ruth invites us to consider that there are times when that which was and has been for so long needs to be questioned, challenged, and rejected. I came face to face with this at a challenging talk as part of the Swindon Literary Festival in 2015, when I attended a talk by Roman Krznaric, where he presented his book "**Empathy**", and I quote his call for this to be in every area of life "be this in sport, in workplaces, in church, in politics. What makes highly empathic people unusual is their desire and capacity to defy authority when empathic action calls for it".ⁱ

Is not this then the essence of Jesus' teaching to us?

Even when it seems difficult, we discover that this understanding of Harvest becomes a life changing moment. And how much we need this in the world is evident. It is the heart of our faith, which we can also call grace.

ⁱ Empathy – why it matters and how to get it. Roman Krznaric. 2014. Rider Books.