

RUTH 1:19-22

(Reading: John 9:1-12; Psalm 73)

Look Who's Back!

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ...

Verse 19 is very frugal with its words.

There are no superfluous expressions written here.

It is actually quite bare.

The two women went on until they came to Bethlehem.

For some days they were on the road, taking what possessions they had with them.

Perhaps they had a donkey or two.

Maybe some leather pouches on the side of those animals.

But no more than that.

There they go.

Two figures silhouetted against the skyline as they went over the hilly ridges and then almost disappearing as they were in the valleys.

We might think they didn't really have much to say.

But they did certainly know that this was the only way to go.

It was the way home.

And it was a long way home because of all it involved emotionally and spiritually.

So I'm sure they could say a lot to each other.

Especially Naomi would be teaching Ruth all about the Law of the Lord.

Then they arrive in Bethlehem.

And here we come across what seems at first to be a quite amazing thing.

Because what we see is who we thought were two relatively insignificant women suddenly the centre of quite a commotion.

And we wonder, don't we, **WHY THE SURPRISE FROM BETHLEHEM?**

Indeed, this is the first part to our text this afternoon.

This is what we meet in verse 19.

So, dear friend, why do you think the whole town of Bethlehem was stirred because of them?

Surely they would have got people coming and going all the time?

Well, it could be that they had not heard the sad news of Elimelech's death, and then the deaths of Mahlon and Kilion.

So to see just Naomi and the foreign woman with her would have been a shock.

But even if they had heard the news it would still have been something to meet Naomi after all this.

She was, after all, part of the family.

And before you say that it must have been distant family let me add that they were all part of the covenantal family.

This is not someone returning to a place after having been away in another place for a decade.

This was a member of the church coming back.

And doesn't that take this to a particularly poignant level?

We will see more of what this means in a moment.

But for now we have the scene where all the womenfolk come to hear about and probably meet Naomi and Ruth.

Why do I say the womenfolk?

Because that explains the use of the feminine in the verbs.

The NIV is quite right to translate it as, "and the women exclaimed."

That it was the women who came out to meet them would be confirmed by the men being involved in the barley harvest.

Only the women were in the town itself – the men would have been out in the fields.

But we still haven't come to the reason as to why there was this surprise.

Was it because there was surprise that she was there?

Hadn't they expected her back?

Could this be simply the surprise of being surprised?

Was this because they were so happy to see her again?

Or could it be they're surprised this is Naomi?

You know, the surprise you have meeting some one after many years because you didn't realise at first it was them?

And while Naomi had only been away ten years, hadn't those ten years taken its toll on her?

It looked like she had aged at least twice that – even thrice that!

She was looking so old and haggard.

You might know someone who has been through quite a lot in their lives.

Doesn't it show on their faces and their overall physical appearance?

There are those who go through something so horrific their hair goes grey overnight.

When you see them after that traumatic event they're totally different!

And not just in their looks either.

What they have been through has changed them in other ways too.

This obviously struck those Bethlehemites.

Verse 19 says they asked, “Can this be Naomi?”

You see, they knew it was her.

Yet it wasn't her – not the old Naomi anyway!

And didn't she tell them that!

The way she does that is a word play on her name.

As we've seen, Naomi means 'pleasant, lovely, delightful.'

It went right along with her husband's name, Elimelech, which means, 'My God is King'.

But now she urges them to call her 'Mara'.

'Mara' which means 'bitter' – the very opposite to what Naomi meant.

And she knows why this has happened too!

“The Almighty has made my life very bitter”, she continues on.

Congregation, we have asked and considered the question, **WHY THE SURPRISE FROM BETHLEHEM?**

But now we have a second question before us.

A question which takes in the verses 20 and 21.

For now we need to ask, **WHY THE SADNESS FROM NAOMI?**

Now, we have noted the play on words between Naomi and Mara.

But let's also note the use of the divine name used here.

For God is called 'The Almighty' twice in verses 20 and 21.

But why is God brought into it this way?

And why this name for Him?

You see, so far the word used for God in the book of Ruth is Yahweh, the God of the covenant.

Aside from the simple word for God in Ruth's confession in verse 16 Yahweh has appeared four times – in verses 6, 8, 13, and 17.

In the NIV this is the word LORD in capital letters.

This describes the God who has saved His people – the God who is taking a personal interest in them.

The God who would ultimately be shown to be God the Son, our Redeemer.

So using a different name alerts us to a different thing.

God as the Almighty is 'El Shaddai'.

When we look back through Hebrew history this ascription for God is particularly tied in with God's overall control of events.

It's there in Genesis 17:1 when God gives the 99 year old Abram the promise of many descendants.

And it appears in Genesis 43:14 when Jacob allows his sons to take Benjamin to Egypt. He knows there that he has to trust himself to the God who is controlling all things.

And in Genesis 49:25 it pops up again in connection with what God did through Joseph becoming the second highest ruler over Egypt.

When Naomi uses this name she acknowledges not only her utter despair at what has happened but also the Lord's over-ruling all that's happening.

She's telling about all her sadness and bitterness but also her faith because it is God behind all this.

He is the providential God, the God who is caring for us in His own special way.

By using this name for God she is leaving it in His hands.

And there's no better place for it to be, is there?

But that doesn't mean she isn't honest about what she is going through.

Unlike many Christians today who go out of their way to avoid any kind of suffering – who even deny it is part of being Christian altogether – she is coping with her situation the right way.

And which better place to be honest about her feelings now with her church family?

There she can be herself and not be condemned for it.

What we are seeing here, congregation, is exactly what we also meet in the book of Ecclesiastes.

You know, Ecclesiastes, the book that so often frustrates us because it only asks even more questions, without many answers.

Ecclesiastes, the book that says already in its first chapter, "I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind."

But Ecclesiastes is also the book which ends making the most sense.

As chapter 11 verse 5 declares, "you cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things."

Naomi and all of us are put in our place.

Because on our own we have no place!

It's when we have met God as El Shaddai that we also meet Him as Yahweh.

It's when we are brought low, humbled, shown up for what we truly are, that we can receive grace.

This is faith shining through, dear friend.

Forget any thought that here is a "bitter" lady in the sense of being "bitter and twisted" but rather here is a believer recognising God's working on her.

The illustration of the tangled threads on the back of a tapestry helps us here.

For doesn't much of this life's experience 'under the sun' – this fallen world afflicted by sin in all its different ways – seem to be that tangle of unrelated colours, loose ends, and unravellable knots.

It is only when the tapestry's other side is visible that these same threads are seen to spell out 'God is Love'.

Naomi doesn't yet see the other side, just like sometimes we don't see it straight-away either.

Because of the painful journey we're on we don't realise there is another story as well.

We can be so involved in the little picture we figure in, we forget the big picture God is so clearly in.

It's faith, though, that tells us there is another side, another story, a big picture.

Faith is God's assurance that it all working to plan – His plan!

This is what we read of in Psalm 73.

As the psalmist sees how well off the wicked are he comes to a point of despair.

In verse 16 he says that when he tried to understand this it was oppressive to him.

But the very next verse he sees the other side.

There it all comes together.

For in verse 17 he says, "till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destination."

So we have answered the question, WHY THE SADNESS FROM NAOMI?

It is an anguish she has to go through.

But she puts that sadness in God's context.

And this is where it helps us even more to ask a third question of this text.

A question which takes in verse 22.

And this question is: WHY THE NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR?

Looking at verse 22 we might think it's stating the obvious.

We already know from verses 19 till 21 that Naomi is back, with Ruth.

But in this way the author draws the first chapter to a conclusion which will also set the scene for the next part of this story.

And let's not forget that this is written along the lines of a story – a very good story!

So the first thing we note here is what we ended with from the second question.
As much as Naomi puts this in God's picture so must we, says the author.
For this is not a 'bad hair day' as people today call their bad days.
This is not some random senseless happening which fate threw her way.
Rather, this is here exactly so that we will see God is up there!

Our Lord helped his disciples to see the same when they came to Him with that blind man in John chapter 9.

Like so many of that time they wondered what that man or his parents could have done wrong for him to be disabled this way.

Just like so many Christians believe today!

But Jesus showed them a much bigger God.

He said that this man was blind "so that the work of God might be displayed in his life."

Congregation, who cares what caused the pain!

It's what it's all leading to that counts!

And there can be no better example of that than the doing and dying of our Lord Jesus Christ Himself!

The New Testament shows Him as God's suffering servant, the One prophesied about long before and now the One in person entering into and sharing this world's suffering and sin.

In His humanity He too wondered why.

What could be more of a despairing cry than those words He uttered upon the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46.)

And yet there, fellow believer, He went beyond any barrier of pain that we've been called to endure.

Then God the Father shows how He is truly 'El Shaddai', for there He hears every prayer which cries, "My God, why?"

This is what Romans 8 verse 32 affirms when the apostle declares, "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things."

Chapter 1 ends quite differently to how things generally were then.

This is a faith in Yahweh which shines out brightly against the darkness the age of the judges usually paints.

This is the faith God used to bring Ruth to faith.

It's her faith which is now going to come out in the following chapters.

How loving God is.

And how much doesn't He show that with the way everything falls into place.

Because the timing is impeccable.

The harvests have begun.

And this is the harvest in spring.

For the barley harvest is the first of those that follow.

There is even a feast – the Feast of First-Fruits – held to commemorate this.

Now, barley was the poor man's crop.

It was cheaper than wheat.

It fed those less privileged and the animals.

But it is the first of the fruits, congregation.

Just as we'll see in the rest of this book, this is setting the beginning of the way to the coming of King David, and through him the coming of the Messiah Himself!

While Barley might be the least valued crop it has an important place in the harvest following it.

Just like Ruth the Moabitess would have!

It's interesting that during this part of the Jewish religious calendar the book of Ruth is often read out in their assemblies.

That's no coincidence.

But let's also pray that through this book they may meet the One who is the first-fruit of all those who have fallen asleep in the faith.

May they come to faith in the resurrected Christ, the One who fulfilled the line Ruth was graciously part of.

May it truly be the new beginning for them.

Amen.

PRAYER:

Let's pray...

O Loving Heavenly Father, how much don't we thank You for the Son of Your Love?

He suffered in a way far beyond any of us will have to endure and all so that we now share in the joy of life forevermore!

May we then put all our difficult times in their true perspective.

For they are only fleeting and momentary afflictions.

Times that You use, as You did with Naomi, to keep us looking to You.

And may many of the Jews today come to faith in the One who is truly the first-fruit of all those who believe.

For that man is the God-man, Jesus Christ, the promised Messiah, who fulfilled all the Old Testament said about Him.

In His dear saving Name we humbly pray, Amen.