

The story of Ruth and Boaz is a love story ...

Today's personal reflection comes from Rachel Roberts, who has just completed her training as a Reader at St Philip and St James Church:

What happened on the threshing floor?

So what did happen on that threshing floor in the dead of night; you may well ask? Did Ruth and Boaz really, just turn around and go back to sleep, as I was taught as a child? Is this a story extolling the virtues of self-control or is there another one, equally uplifting, to be told? And then why should, something which is essentially very private, matter to you and me?

The description of the episode is suitable vague and sufficiently imbued with euphemism to allow me to put forward my own modern (or maybe not so modern!) interpretation of what happened between two people of noble character. That interpretation, however, requires us to turn our attention back to the dynamics between the main characters, back to the dry and shimmering heat of days in the fields, against the backdrop of a Mediterranean harvest.

Boaz may be a man of noble character with a kind heart, but some altogether greater turmoil is at play within his inner being. Ruth's strength of character, nobility of spirit and vulnerability has stirred up strong emotions within him. The power of his attraction to her unleashes his insecurities: surely, he tells himself, she will prefer some younger man.

Meanwhile, Ruth is facing her own array of conflicting emotions. Boaz's attention towards her has awakened a desire which has laid dormant for a long-time, a longing for intimacy she will not allow herself to express. At stake is her commitment to Naomi from which she will stubbornly not move an inch, even if paradoxically, it could secure a better future for both herself and her mother-in-law.

In the background, Naomi notices everything. She notices the change in her daughter-in-law. She realises the inner unexpressed turmoil within both Ruth and Boaz. And it is only then that she finally understands that a happy denouement lies in her own hands. So, she hatches up a plan, some strange and antiquated tradition about a kinsman-redeemer, which everyone will fall over themselves to make happen, in their eagerness to secure a happy ending.

Ruth follows closely the instructions that Naomi gives her; instructions to prepare herself like a bride for her wedding night. Intuitively, Ruth understands the permission for happiness she has been given; an unconventional blessing from an older woman.

So ... what did happen on the threshing floor in the dead of night?

Boaz wakes up to find the woman, he believes beyond his reach, at his feet, offering herself to him of her own free will.

So, what do you suppose happened next?

I believe that neither of them got much sleep that night.

I believe that what happened between them was the natural conclusion of everything that went before.

I believe that in delight and tenderness they knew each other in love.

I am glad the Bible has stories like this one. We need to be inspired by positive expressions of human sexuality, ones that arise out of mutual commitment, self-giving and the humble acceptance of our interdependence ... ones that change us for the better.

It makes a welcome change from the daily grind of stories about sexual violence perpetrated against the most vulnerable. It makes a change from those equally unsavoury tales about sexuality being used to lure the unsuspecting to their downfall. However, the accounts that pain me the most are the ones about little girls. The countless little girls the world over, who in the name of some warped notion of female purity, are subjected to the degrading and agonising practice of female genital mutilation, depriving the women that they will become of sexual fulfilment.

However, there is a risk that we focus exclusively on instances of sexual abuse and exploitation. The risk is that we forget to recognise and rejoice in what God intended.

The story of Ruth and Boaz is a love story ... in its fullest sense, a celebration of God's gift of fulfilment between two people surprised by the strength of their love and attraction towards each other, in rather unconventional circumstances. It is a story that reminds us to give thanks to God for our human nature in all its mysterious and wonderful ways.

Rachel Roberts