

Who do you think you are? Ruth 4.13-22

So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. When they came together, the Lord made her conceive, and she bore a son. Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without a next-of-kin, and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him." The women of the neighbourhood ... named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.

"Judging the heroes of the past by the standards of the present might lead to us having no heroes at all. But we shall make little progress without accepting the full truth of their lives." Someone said that on a BBC News report on 21st July, reporting on the repercussions of the Black Lives Matter movement. It made me think about my maternal grandfather, Hugh Basil Holme. He died when I was five, so I only have dim memories of a kind, gentle Grandad with a workshop smelling of sawdust, where he made beautiful, delicate furniture for my doll's house. He made me a Noah's Ark, too (which I still have), in the shape of a Burmese river-boat — because, before he retired, my Grandad used to work for the Indian Civil Service in Burma (now Myanmar) — which was then part of the British Empire.

My mother (who a bit of a romantic) was very proud of her Holme ancestry. She used to tell us about the first Hugh Holme, a fenland rebel of Viking descent who became an outlaw under King John and went off to live in a cave above Mardale (now under Haweswater). "Hugh Holme's cave" is still marked on the OS maps — so it must be true! I imagined him as a sort of Robin Hood figure, robbing the rich to help the poor.

I think most of us quite like to have the odd black sheep in our family tree — especially if we can make him a romantic hero. Maybe we find it harder to cope with having ancestors who *didn't* rebel — who didn't speak out against all the bits of our history that

we now need to question, like slavery or the Empire. As far as we can tell from his diaries, my grandfather was a decent man who tried to deal honestly and fairly with the complexities of colonial life. I never thought of him as a hero or a black sheep — he was just Grandad. But he was still part of the colonial system — which means that that bit of history is part of my ancestry — whether I like it or not.

Being human — being part of a family — means being part of history, part of the muddle of what people have made of their lives, trying to work out what's good and what's bad, how to create a decent society, how to look after our families and live with our neighbours, trying to work out where our faith in God is leading us. Very often, looking back through history, we realize we (or our ancestors) have got it wrong — sometimes, badly wrong. Sometimes, the only way we can deal with our history is through repentance: it brings us up with a jolt and makes us realize our need for redemption. And that realization — that honesty — opens up a path towards reconciliation. We can't change the past: but we can acknowledge its mistakes, and use that knowledge to ask for forgiveness and to “build better” for the future.

So Ruth's story comes to an end — with a new beginning. The story that began in exile ends with homecoming. The story that began with death, with the heartache of loss, ends with new life. Naomi, who returned home empty and bitter, ends the story as a grandmother, holding a new baby — a new grandson, according to the ancient custom of the “redeemer” — in her arms. The beginning of Ruth's story looked like a dead end: no husband, no children, no future. But it ends with a family tree that points forward, that slots her into the story of David — and ultimately into Jesus' family tree (Matthew 1.5).

So who are the heroes and who are the “black sheep” in Jesus' family tree? As Meg pointed out on Wednesday, Matthew goes out of his way to include five women in Jesus' family tree (quite revolutionary in itself among all those “begats”). All of them could be regarded as “black sheep”, one way or another — foreigners, prostitutes,

“breaches” in the purity of the bloodline (the name of Boaz’ ancestor Perez means “breach” — you can read the really scandalous story of his birth in Genesis 38). But they are also figures of extraordinary righteousness, figures of what Meg called “a ‘greater righteousness’ in which the least likely, most-often-shunned, people perform acts of fidelity and help to build the kingdom”. And actually, when we look at the “heroes”, some of them are pretty dubious ancestors too — like King David himself.

We’ve had an amazingly rich journey through the book of Ruth over the past few weeks, and I’m sure you will share my gratitude to all the contributors. Reading her story with empathy has opened windows into so many worlds — the worlds of refugees and asylum seekers and migrant workers — of village gossip and neighbourhood solidarity — of the politics of inclusion and of exclusion — into ancient customs and antiquated laws. It’s given a voice to some of the women of the Bible — some remarkable women. We’ve been invited to read it as a piece of subversive story-telling, or simply as a love story.

And out of all that muddle, God does something amazing. Something as simple as the birth of a baby — something that brings hope and new life. Out of all that muddle of mixed motives, heroes and black sheep, suspicious neighbourhoods and village gossip, antiquated regulations and the leading of a generous heart — God begins the quiet work of redemption. I’m really glad Ruth is part of Jesus’ family tree.

And maybe that’s a good a place as any to finish. The TFTD team needs to take a break over the summer for rest and recharging (we’re human too!). So the daily TFTD will be “paused” during August, and we’re planning to restart in September. Look out for occasional bulletins, messages from Robin, Sunday sermons — and of course I’ll still be sending around the links for Sunday worship. Do get in touch to tell me what you have liked (or not liked) about TFTD, and how we can best help to resource your spiritual journey. I’d love to share stories, poems or favourite prayers occasionally. And don’t forget there are lots of good resources out there on-line to help you find a pattern

of daily (or occasional) prayer and Bible study. The Church of England has lots of good stuff on its website: click on

<https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/join-us-service-daily-prayer>

Stay safe — enjoy the sunshine! — and God bless,

Loveday