

The Well - Samosa Sunday - Ruth 1

In 2004 songwriter Steven Clark wrote a song called "Coming Home". <http://www.stevenclarksongs.me.uk/songlyrics.html> It speaks of brothers, sisters, fathers and mothers returning home after years apart. The final verse takes a wider perspective and says:

From Iraq and Zimbabwe,
Your family's coming home
And from Turkey and Somalia
Your family's coming home
Seeking rest and refuge
They have never known
They're coming home, your family's coming home

Coming home to a place they've never been
Coming home to a land they've never seen
Coming home to a family they have never known
A' Jock Tamson's bairns
Are coming home.

In this Year of Homecoming it is good to celebrate the many new Scots who have made their home in our land, many of them settling in Govanhill, following Jews and Irish in the 19th century, Indians and Pakistanis in the 20th, and Roma, Afghans, Iranians, Somalis and many others in the 21st. Govanhill has a population of about 15,000, but it must be one of the most ethnically diverse areas of Scotland, with around 42 nationalities represented. A Scotsman article in February 2013 remarked,

"The impression one gets from walking around, especially on Allison Street, the main drag, is that one has left Scotland behind for a while. You can daunder up and down and hear not a word of English, or even Glaswegian, spoken. It's all Urdu, Romani, Slovak, Polish, Czech, Somali, Igbo and more. Much of the shop front signage is in Arabic."

In the midst of this communities lies The Well, a Christian project whose vision states *"We believe God's great plan is to bless all peoples of the earth through Jesus the Messiah. He calls His people into partnership with himself in His purpose. In response, The Well seeks to be a blessing to our neighbours from all over the world."*

This witness of hospitality has always been a responsibility of God's people, who as Jesus said, are to be the light of the world (Matt 5:14); and as the Bible includes many stories of migration due to famine (Genesis 47), persecution (Exodus 3:7-10), captivity (2 Chronicles 36:20), and release (Ezra 2), it is not hard to find Bible passages that shed light on migration to contemporary Scotland, and which help the Church to reach out to the stranger with Christian love and practical help.

The OT book of Ruth is a prime example of this, set as it is in the days of the judges, when *“there was no king in Israel, and everyone did what was right in their own eyes.”* (Judges

21:25) This lawlessness led to idolatry, barbarism, cruelty and revenge, even among fellow Israelites, and it is very hard to see anything good or godly in people’s behaviour (Judges 17-21). No wonder in Ruth chapter 1 Elimelech and Naomi concluded that God’s judgement was upon Bethlehem (house of bread), and set out to seek a better life in Moab (wasteland). The book of Ruth, however, shows us that God had not forgotten his people, and indeed was calling people from among the surrounding nations to become part of Israel and to share in his blessing and his purposes.

In chapter 1 we see Ruth, a Moabite widow, leaving home, family, and no doubt language and customs too, to find a better life in Israel with her Israelite mother in law Naomi. As the story unfolds we find her experiencing God’s providence through gleaning in the fields of Boaz, a godly landowner. He turns out to be a relative of Naomi, marries Ruth, and their son Obed becomes the grandfather of King David. It would make a beautiful story for an opera, and is full of the drama of life - hope and tragedy in chapter 1, providence and hard work in chapter 2, love and marriage in chapter 3, and an important future for the family in chapter 4.

Chapter 1 introduces us to the characters in the drama, and their names are full of meaning. Elimelech = God is my King, Naomi = Pleasant, Mahlon = Weakling, Chilion = Pining, Ruth = Friend. They may have felt, like many migrants today, nameless people who saw themselves as insignificant and powerless. However, in the face of real tragedy and loss, they are individuals who matter to God, and who have a vital part to play in God’s plans to bring the nations to worship him.

In The Well we are dealing with individuals and families who each have their own stories. Like Naomi in Moab, they have problems adjusting to life in a land that is very different from their own. Those from India and Pakistan speak Punjabi and Urdu, and some are young wives who have been brought from rural Pakistan to inner city Glasgow. In a society in which many agencies, even good ones, can become impersonal and insensitive, The Well keeps files for all our clients, so that advisors are able to understand the whole picture that is affecting the client and the wider family.

Migrants face many challenges moving to Scotland, and many want to make it their new home. At The Well we try to help them fit in, but also want to point them to the eternal city that has foundations, whose builder and maker is God (Hebrews 11). People may come to Scotland for political, social or financial reasons, but often the insecurity and unsettlement of migration opens people’s hearts to deeper spiritualities. And so we see in Ruth chapter 1 a return that has three separate elements.

1) They were returning to God. *“Your God will be my God.”*

Naomi was returning reluctantly to the God she had been running away from for years, when she and Elimelech left Bethlehem for Moab. Ruth was turning gladly to the God whom she believed in and whose covenant she embraced. The tragedies of their lives combined, like those of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15, to bring them back to God. Several times we read that Ruth was “returning”, even though she had never been to Bethlehem before. She recognised the God of Israel, not merely as an ethnic or tribal deity, but as the true Lord of all, the covenant God who had said to his people “My presence will be with you”, and “You will be my people and I will be your God.”

Most people who come to The Well have no problem wanting to see God's hand in their lives. Some are fatalistic and like Naomi feel that God has been harsh to them - they are grateful for the practical and personal care that The Well offers, and appreciate a sensitive ear and compassionate heart. Others see that God has kept them safe and, like Ruth, are grateful for a new start in a new country. Many are struggling under almost impossible strain and have nowhere else to turn, and see The Well as God's provision for their need.

We, who follow Jesus Christ as Lord, serve a God who is not distant, powerless or uncaring. Rather, he has come to earth in Jesus Christ, and who is Immanuel, God with us. We would like to do more for our clients, but in what we do we seek to reflect the love of Christ to the outsider and stranger.

*Our fellow-sufferer yet retains
a fellow feeling of our pains;
And still remembers in the skies
His tears, his agonies and cries. (Paraphrase of Hebrews 4:15)*

Some have also come to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, and like Ruth, have taken shelter under the wings of the LORD. Many value the prayerful Christian atmosphere of The Well, and feel that, unlike some other agencies, our volunteers genuinely care for them.

2) They were returning to God's people. *"Your people will be my people."*

In Moab there was nothing for them. Naomi said she had left full - full of hope and excitement about what lay in store for her and her family, but now she was coming back empty. She had nothing except memories of loss and sadness. But she knew that in Israel there would be provision for her, and as we see the story unfold we can see how God watched over them so that Ruth was able to glean in the fields of Boaz, marry him and produce a son whose grandson would be King David.

Ruth may well have faced discrimination, racism and exploitation as a foreign widow - Bethlehem was not free from unpleasant characters. But she was welcomed as a member of God's people, and became part of the royal line of Judah that led to David and ultimately to Jesus.

Individuals matter to God, and at The Well we try to get to know our clients and provide understanding and support. Psalm 87:4 tells us of God's plan that people from other parts of the world, who are not native Israelites, would belong as those who were born in Zion.

*'I will record Rahab (Egypt) and Babylon
among those who acknowledge me –
Philistia too, and Tyre, along with Cush (Ethiopia) –
and will say, "This one was born in Zion."*

It's interesting that Ruth's future mother-in-law was Rahab the prostitute from Jericho who had protected the Israelite spies, and Boaz himself had no problems marrying a foreigner. The important thing was that she was a fellow believer in YHWH, and therefore welcome in God's family. At a time when many churches are struggling to relate to their own communities, The Well's practical service in the name of Jesus Christ breaks down barriers and creates opportunities for witness and testimony.

The glorious message of the Bible is that God is calling people together from all nation and backgrounds into the universal people of God. Muslims often assume that Christianity is a

western religion and that all Europeans are Christians. Sometimes western Christians give that impression too and expect “converts” to leave their culture behind and adopt Scottish culture. The Well provides a meeting place where no one is an outsider and everyone can feel at home. We are planning to move soon to new premises, and we are seeking extra financial support to make it into a place of sanctuary and community.

3) They were returning together. *“Where you go, I will go...”*

Naomi depended on her daughter in law Ruth to accompany her home and provide food for them to eat. And Ruth could not have managed without Naomi. These two widows gave strength to one another as they faced the challenge of making a new life in Bethlehem. In spite of Naomi’s bitterness, Ruth saw the living God in her life, and in committing herself to Naomi, she became a vehicle of great blessing to her mother-in-law and the wider family, to the nation of Israel through her great grandson King David, and to the whole world through “great David’s greater son, the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Oftentimes we struggle through life, focusing on our own problems and envying others who seem to have life easy. When Naomi saw the women of Bethlehem and heard them saying “Look, there’s Naomi”, she no doubt envied them their comfortable life. But it is so often in the midst of the struggles of life that real faith shines through.

The Well not only exists to give help and advice to clients. We also want to help Scottish churches to reach out across cultures with the Good News of Jesus. We provide opportunities for volunteers to get involved with people of other backgrounds and faiths, and we are always looking for new helpers, as several experienced ones have recently moved on. We can also provide advice, resources and training for churches seeking to reach out to their own multi-cultural communities.

Conclusion

The Well has been a place of welcome, hospitality and help for 20 years. It depends on the generosity of individuals, churches and charitable trusts. We are grateful for the years of Church of Scotland support, but this has now stopped and our future is uncertain. The needs are greater than ever, and we believe God wants us to continue. Many benefit from advice and help with benefits, English language classes, a mother and toddler group and a women’s craft group. We depend on a core of committed volunteers and are always looking for more. For those involved it is a wonderful privilege to share in the lives of people from other cultures and backgrounds, and it greatly enriches our faith.

Just as Ruth needed Naomi to help her come home to Bethlehem, so The Well needs people like you in churches up and down Scotland to help us carry on this ministry. Your prayers and donations will help to point people to Jesus, the one who says, “Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”

And just as Naomi needed Ruth in order to share in God’s plans for her people, so Scottish churches need to think beyond their own doors, and sow the precious seed of the Gospel in the lives of people who have come from other nations and who as yet do not know the Lord Jesus Christ.

As Jesus said, *“I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.”* John 12:24