

Introduction

- "It was meant to be...", or "when your time comes, that's just the way it is."
 - phrases I have often heard, at the side of a bed in hospital, or from a grieving family
 - they are **not expressing a particular trust in God** - often far from it!
 - but they are expressing a deep sense that **there is more to life than the chance meeting of atoms**, that there should or could be some meaning, some sense, some purpose behind the events of life and death
 - that **this death or this illness**, otherwise inexplicable, **needs some kind of explanation, justification**, for otherwise the pointlessness of life would be intolerable.
- For our **society**, by and large, **dismisses such a sense of purpose**:
 - life is about **pleasure, ease, positive relationships, seeing the family settled (at best)**
 - we may not **say it** so baldly, but look around at the way people live their lives and see if those are not the priorities!
- It is often only when death or grave illness intrudes that flickers of an awareness of **"there must be more than this...."** intrude into the thoughts of most people
 - **remember 9/11, people went to churches? faded away again...**
 - though affected by event, perhaps helped by their encounter with God's word and His people, their priorities and purpose were not (for the most part) fundamentally altered
- We live in a day when God's providence, his purpose, his provision, his impact on life is denied - if not in word, then certainly in action - by most people.
- The book of Ruth - **a gem of a story** - is also in such a world:
 - a world where faith is challenged
- (Judges 21:25) **In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.**
 - folk were making it up as they went along, doing as they saw fit!
 - and the wider spiritual culture, of the surrounding nations and of the not-completely cleansed nation of Israel, didn't help!
 - temptation to other Gods - Baal & Ashteroth, fertility - in particular to God being only in part of life...
 - the struggle to understand the chaos and evil in the world around - book of Judges is grim!

Exposition

- Lets meet with some people who lived in a world very different, yet in some ways similar, to our own
 - people whose faith helped them navigate the sometimes troubled waters of their daily lives - family, work, love, children...

A certain man... named... dies...

- (1) *In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. (2) The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there. (3) Now Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. (4) They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, (5) both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.*
- A certain man - personal, not national!
 - **God interested in us as individuals!** Ordinary people...
 - very, very striking - particularly in contrast with other contemporary stories!

- Bethlehem - home of bread! Unlikely place for famine
- With that in mind, why did Elimelech leave?
 - demonstrate **faithlessness**? too little evidence, but possible!
 - contrast with his name, which means: "My God is King!"
- Naomi: "pleasant, lovely, delightful"
- Mahlon/Chilion: Canaanite names, possibly hints of pain, sickness, failing?
- Orpah/Ruth: Moabite names; meaning unclear, only nationality clear!

Tragedy!

- tragedy of an early death
- tragedy of Elimelech's name snuffed out
- tragedy of no grand-children

The Lord visits

- (6) *When she heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, Naomi and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. (7) With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.*
- Implication of clinging on to faith, of contact with home:
 - the LORD came to the aid of his people!
 - Naomi remembered, clung onto, clearly or dimly, the Lord (Yahweh) throughout
- So when she hears news from Judah, she interprets the news:
 - not as "the famine's lifted"
 - or as "there's been an economic upturn"
 - but as "the LORD has visited!"

Naomi's care

- (8) *Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me. (9) May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband." Then she kissed them and they wept aloud*
- Naomi has a genuine, deep care for her daughter-in-laws!
 - practical - "go back" - widows, without protection or provision, at least in their cultural and family home they might have some hope of finding another husband
 - but her care is expressed particularly by **bringing them to God!**
 - "May the LORD...." find you husbands, the best blessing she can think of for them!
- The word she chooses to express her prayer for them is insightful:
 - **kindness** is **hesed** - a great Old Testament word at the centre of God's covenant relationship with his people, speaking of steadfast love & faithfulness, overtones of both the warmth of his love and reliability/strength of his care.
 - she is saying, "may the LORD be to you this kind of strong, warm, steadfast love that is at the heart of his identity and character!"
- Naomi really loves both Ruth and Orpah!

The pain of partings

- (10) *and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people." (11) But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? (12) Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me - even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons- (13) would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD's hand has gone out against me!" (14) At this they wept again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-by, but Ruth clung to her.*
- You get a sense of the mutual love as we watch them parting:
 - Naomi intent on the girl's best interest, sending them back to their homes - and losing for herself companionship, help...
 - the girls weeping at the parting, struggling with a really hard choice:

- maybe food, maybe a husband, at least familiarity - but no easy ride, no loving m-in-law - in Moab
- maybe food, probably no husband, the unknown - no easy ride, but with Naomi - in Judah
- Note how Naomi - almost humourously - points out how hopeless coming with her will be:
 - she ain't going to have any more sons that they could marry!!
- Note Naomi's honesty and trust:
 - the LORD's hand has gone out against me!
 - no hiding her anger, no stiff upper lip, and yet he is still LORD (Yahweh) - though he is acknowledged as Lord, as the faithful one (by dint of his name), he certainly didn't feel like a faithful God to Naomi!

Ruth's faith

- (15) "Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her." (16) But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. (17) Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me." (18) When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

BUT....

- For Ruth, living with Naomi, looking at her, watching her reactions, learning to love her - for all her imperfections....
 - all of that has brought her to the point where she wants to join with Naomi,
 - personally - where you go, I will go - a statement of personal commitment; there is something winsome, attractive, something that draws Ruth to Naomi
 - communally - your people will be my people - a statement of commitment to a completely new life, a new culture, a new location
 - faith - your God will be my God!!! <black>- most fundamentally, here is where Ruth joins Naomi!
- Ruth has got to know Naomi the person... she has come to appreciate the community that Naomi comes from... but most of all she has come to trust Naomi's God!
 - Lost for Words, introducing people to Jesus!

Naomi or Mara?

- (19) So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, "Can this be Naomi?" (20) "Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. (21) I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me." (22) So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.
- Get back to Bethlehem, women meet them:
 - in terms of the narrative of the whole book, we're still setting the scene
- But even here, struggling to find meaning up to this point, note how Naomi reacts:
 - not only is God the LORD, he is also the Almighty (Shaddai) - one mighty, and particularly mightily able to bless (contexts in which word is used in Genesis in particular);
 - Naomi is saying: I am bitter, I don't understand, I'm not in a good place - but yet I know God as LORD and as Almighty, as faithful and as mighty and able to bless; I don't know how that is true, but it is!

Conclusion

- Naomi demonstrated a deep trust and loyalty in God:
 - questioning, bitter she may have been
 - but throughout she remained loyal to the Lord (Yahweh), to the Almighty (Shaddai)
- Such trust that among those she knew were those who chose to join her in trusting God:
 - to choose not just a relationship with an individual
 - to choose not just to be part of a community
 - but chose to enter into a relationship of trust with her God!!
- May we learn from Naomi, and from Ruth, to live our lives clearly in the providence of God, not trying to fly solo!