

THE BOOK OF RUTH

A sermon preached in Trinity College Chapel, Cambridge
28 October 2007

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Ruth 1; Matthew 22.15-22

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. Amen.

May I begin by thanking the Dean and Chaplains for their invitation to preach this evening and for their welcome, which is the more gracious for your roll of distinguished visitors this term. To find oneself flanked by bishops is always a little unnerving. Clergy, you see, are distinguished not only by the hierarchy of their honorifics but come colour-coded. Whereas bishops are *rightly* reverend, go gorgeous in magenta, and speak in purple prose, the parish priest's vestment is fustian, and, as I fear you may discover, his discourse just as dull.

So now to the hedgehog and fox. Not the latest gastro-pub in Lion Yard, but the title of that essay by Isaiah Berlin, borrowed from the Greek: while the mind of the fox ranges far, the hedgehog knows one big thing.¹ There are those, says Berlin, who, like the hedgehog, view the world through the lens of a single defining idea; while others, like the fox, pursue many ends, sometimes contradictory, often diverse. In respect of *Ruth*, we shall roam tonight as theological foxes in the coverts of contested truths; but we shall seek also in the parley of interpreting tongues to play hermeneutical hedgehogs, reducing for present purposes the infinite riches of our Scripture to a single Grand Idea.

'Almost every question that we have to deal with about the future of Britain revolves around what we mean by Britishness,' the Prime Minister has declared. 'Who we are and what we stand for are crucial to any nation's future in the modern world.'² We are much exercised by the topic of social cohesion. A diminishing sense of community is now the third most pressing issue of public debate after the defence of the realm and the NHS.³ The threat of terrorism and questions of race relations have heightened that concern in a country in which it is projected that 70% or more of our population growth to 2031 will result from immigration.⁴ Last year the Government established the Commission on Integration and Cohesion. The Archbishop of Canterbury has drawn attention repeatedly to the fragmentation of our society and the alienation and dysfunctionality it generates; and the Chief Rabbi's latest book, significantly subtitled *Recreating Society*, has

¹ Berlin I., 'The Hedgehog and The Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History', in Hardy H., 'Russian Thinkers', London, Hogarth, 1978

² In a debate organised by 'Prospect', April 1995

³ Ipsos MORI poll, March 2006

⁴ Office of National Statistics, population estimates, August 2007

questioned the hitherto received wisdom of multiculturalism⁵ – as indeed in a rather different way has a recent Master of this College in an important critique of communitarian views of identity.⁶ Can different, even antagonistic, cultures share the same territory? Is integration possible without assimilation?

Such are the questions and some of the contested truths I want to bring to the *Ruth* in pursuit of the Grand Idea. *Ruth*, as the tale of an alien, a Moabitess and therefore a forbidden foreigner, who is conscripted by the end of her story into Israel's social and political order as a forebear of King David, gives us opportunity to reflect on issues of nearness and social distance, national identity, friendship, kinship and strangeness.⁷

For two recent commentators, Ruth is a paradigm immigrant. One reads the story as a tale of the reinvigoration of a nation by way of Ruth's assimilation. Her conversion witnesses to the worthiness of Naomi's God; her attitude and conduct foreshadow the holiness of the Golden Age of David's reign. Saving the nation from the anarchy which distinguished the period of the Judges, Ruth serves to found a stable and glorious monarchy.⁸ A second commentator, however, sees Ruth as destabilising the order she helps to create. As a Moabite – and she is continually represented as such – Ruth is forever the outsider. For all her oath of commitment to Naomi, to Naomi's people and their God, she disabuses the nation of their fantasies of unique identity and racial purity, opening them to difference. Because of Ruth, forever in the ancestral line there will be a foreigner; forever they will be a mongrel people.⁹

Interestingly, in these two writers we see both dominant responses to immigrants in our culture. Either we value immigrants for what they bring to us – diversity and innovation, energy, talents and industry, together with a renewed appreciation of the strengths of our own culture which they choose to embrace; or '*they*' are feared for what '*they*' will do to us – consume our benefits, dilute our heritage, fragment our politics and undermine the democratic ideal.¹⁰

In both these writers, though different reasons, as for many another, it is good that *otherness* come to live in Bethlehem and is written indelibly into the life of Naomi's people. So it was for Goethe (for whom *Ruth* is 'Das lieblichste kleine Ganze',¹¹ the most beautiful little whole of the Hebrew Scriptures), for

⁵ Sacks J., 'The Home we Build Together: Recreating Society', London, Continuum, 2007

⁶ Sen A., 'Identity and Violence', London, Allan Lane, 2006

⁷ I am indebted to a number of feminist commentators on 'Ruth' in what follows, but especially Bonnie Honig, on whose paper 'Ruth, The Model Emigrée' I draw (Honig B., 'Ruth, the Model Emigrée: Mourning and The Symbolic Politics of Immigration', in Brenner A., 'Ruth and Esther: A Feminist Companion to the Bible', 2nd series, London, Sheffield Academic Press, 1999, pp.50-74

⁸ Ozick C., 'Ruth', in Kates J.A. and Reimer G.T. (eds), 'Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story', New York, Ballantine, 1994, pp.211-32

⁹ Kristeva J., 'Nations Without Nationalism', trans. Roudiez L.S., New York, Columbia University Press, 1993

¹⁰ Honig, 'Ruth'

¹¹ 'West-östlicher Divan', in 'Werke', ed. Dunker, p.217

Dante, Bunyan and Milton; and so it is for contemporary writers like Lois Henderson in best Mills and Boon tradition.¹² I would like to suggest to you, however, that *Ruth* is *not*, as many of these commentators suppose, a tale of happy closure, but one of incomplete mourning and failed transition. It represents, in fact, the situation of many in our immigrant communities, whose plight Keats, perhaps, came closest to understanding in his image of a woman weeping, her sad heart sick for home amid the alien corn.¹³

Many are the subtleties in the text to which we could point in defence of this thesis, but one only, and briefly, must suffice this evening. Consider, if you will, Ruth's silence at the end of the book, in Chapter 4. That eloquent silence, one of a number, was foreshadowed at the close of Chapter 1, when, as we heard this evening, Naomi fails to introduce or even mention the grieving Ruth to the women who welcome her back to Bethlehem. There, in Chapter 4, even has her sad heart, having suffered the loss of Moab, a husband, and of Orpah, her kinswoman, is now deprived even of meaningful relationship with Naomi, her adopted mother, when Obed, the child Ruth has borne by Boaz, is substituted for her. That eloquent silence, one of a number in the book, was foreshadowed at the close of Chapter 1, when, as we heard this evening, These two events in Ruth's story mark familiar episodes in much immigrant life. After the early often over-zealous process of assimilation in which all previous connections are disavowed comes the failure of transition and a retreat into separatism, which leaves people stranded in relation to both the receiving culture and to the lost homeland.

Thus interpreted, *Ruth* is a parable of loss and recovery which speaks into our political and social reality. I hope that, even in this digested read, I have indicated how wide of the mark is Thomas Paine's assertion that *Ruth* is 'an idle, bungling story, foolishly told ... about a strolling country-girl, creeping slyly to bed with her cousin ... Pretty stuff indeed to be called the Word of God!'¹⁴ That Word for us tonight, the single Grand Idea of the hermeneutical hedgehog, is the challenge to consider what are the claims of faith, in this particular instance, in relation to the policy and practice of civil society. 'Whose side are you on – God or Caesar? Show us the colour of your money!' as Jesus might have put it in the colloquial Aramaic of our second lesson. This Scripture calls people of faith to repentance, I believe, and to redress, to try to discern what are the structures of grace, the institutional and cultural conditions, the appropriate rites and ceremonies, for the proper reception of the stranger into our midst. For the constitution and reconstitution of our selves always takes place in a social context. In the Bethlehem of this story, Naomi is reconstituted in plenitude and potency: Boaz, the redeemer, is her relative; the townswomen are her friends to offer support and sympathy; Naomi's connection with Moab and the graves of her husband and sons is preserved by Ruth, and her dear dead kin can be mourned in Bethlehem. Ruth, by contrast, is diminished by the election she has made; her mourning

¹² Henderson L.T. 'Ruth: a Novel', New York, Harper and Rowe, 1981

¹³ Keats J., 'Ode to a Nightingale'

¹⁴ Paine T., 'The Age of Reason II', ch.1. He continues, 'It is, however, one of the best books of the Bible, for it is free from murder and rapine.'

is endless. The loss of Ruth's homeland cannot even be articulated in Judah. Finally her son is taken from her, and her silence is absolute.

Ruth sets before us, as I hope I have shown, a novella rich in contemporary relevance, inviting our response, not to easy generalities but to the poignant particular of a woman's survival, whose plight is that of millions of our contemporaries, whose situation should be a scandal to civilised society by reason of our common humanity, and an unconscionable affront to the Body of Christ, for we, but for the grace of God, find ourselves under the same condemnation. This is the Christ to whom, for the Christian reader, Ruth's story points – great David's greater son. This is the Christ who calls us to remembrance that we too were once aliens and foreigners, excluded from citizenship in Israel and strangers to the covenants of the promise, without hope, without God, in the world. But now, through this same Christ, we who once were far off have been brought near. 'For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility ... Consequently, we are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens of the household of God.'¹⁵

But then already this evening the choir have shown us most beautifully how Trinity's men and women may understand these things. In 1633, George Herbert, an alumnus of this College, published his second 'Antiphon', words which Britten took and set for our instruction and delight in the anthem this evening. The design of Herbert's poem is one of those structures of grace to which I alluded earlier; for the dialogue of the angels and humankind, interlaced by the argument of the chorus, dissolves in adoration and heartfelt praise the very polarities it sets up between earth and heaven, time and eternity, Holy God and sinful man, and it concludes –

Praised be the God alone,
Who hath made of two folds one.

In truth, 'He himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility ... Consequently, we are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens of the household of God.'

Eternal Wisdom,
Pattern on which the universe is formed,
in whose image and likeness
we are made, women and men,
in equality, love and freedom:
forgive us our oppression of the stranger;
amend us for our abuses
in the name of greed and power;
direct us in our memories
in the name of thankfulness
for the liberties we enjoy,
and in every structure of grace we may devise

¹⁵ Ephesians 2.11-19

to breach the dividing walls of hostility.
In the name of Christ who is our Peace.

Amen.