

Two favourite Old Testament characters: Ruth and Jonah

By John Gordon-Clark – 9 December 2011

Ruth

There could not be two more different people than Ruth and Jonah - a loving Moabite woman from the earlier age of the Judges, and a latter day, agonised prophet from the era of the Kings. Two very short books tell on the one hand of self giving love, and on the other of self-willed, self-pitying obstinacy.

As far as the book of Ruth is concerned I suppose I'm attracted to it because I'm a romantic at heart. The bare outline of the story, in which the humble immigrant gains the love and respect of the rich landowner, finds echoes in the fiction of our own time. But this story starts with tragedy, that of three deaths, of Naomi's husband and then of her sons. Faced with the possibility of long years of widowhood for her daughters-in-law if they stay with her, Naomi tries to persuade them to go back to their homes where, as she tells them, 'May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me.' Ruth's insistence that she stays with Naomi, starting with the words 'Entreat me not to leave thee...' has remained in our language and our consciousness not just because of its beauty but because it speaks to us the truths of a loving heart.

The writer paints a picture of delicate beauty in the description of harvest time and the way a beneficent employer treats not just his workers but too the poor women who are allowed to glean. The love that grows between Boaz and Ruth is told within the context of the tribal customs of the time. His recognition of her worth initially comes from report, but his own observation of her tireless work in his fields, and the steps he takes to protect her, leads him to decide to choose her for his wife. Ruth's own daring in showing her feelings for him in lying at his feet all night reinforces that decision. However, Boaz still has to overcome the problem of the prior claim of family rights, and he goes through these formalities with a courteous strictness. The happy ending of marriage carries an even happier ending for Naomi. To her is given the privilege of nursing her grandson, Obed, whose own grandson was to be David.

A beautiful story that gives us, from an age ago, the perfect example of how we should live as families and within our society.

Jonah

The life of a prophet is not an easy one, as Jeremiah, for one, graphically tells us. I think I'm attracted to Jonah because many of us, me included, are in danger of sharing his two major negative attitudes towards God. The first is the tendency to run away from God when he invites us to do something we may find difficult. Like Jonah, we so often go to extreme limits to avoid our duties - he even pays his fare (a human and humorous touch) to get right away. But God does not let him off. Using the natural order, combined with the fear of the sailors, Jonah is delivered to the very depths of despair via the belly of a great fish. His cry for help ends with a promise: 'But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay.' And so the second time he is called, Jonah obeys, and his prophecy of

doom on Nineveh is a roaring success story, with even the king repenting in sackcloth and ashes.

And here we come to Jonah's second negative attitude towards God. He is angry with him over his change of mind about the wicked folk of Nineveh, so angry that he asks to die. When this release is denied Jonah goes into a fit of sulks, and he cavalierly assumes that a bush's shelter, for which he is very happy, is not a gift from God. And so God asks him a second time: 'Is it right for you to be angry?' Again Jonah answers him in the affirmative: 'Yes, angry enough to die.'

In our arguments with God over what we believe are injustices we, like Jonah, find it difficult to accept that his purposes for humanity do not always chime in with our selfish wishes, especially when we think we have followed his wishes and his laws to the letter.

This book is unique in the bible in that it ends with a question, a question that God asks of all humanity: 'Should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?'

In our day, for Nineveh, where and for whom is God's question asked.....?