

## **Notes from Sermon given by Ian Stackhouse - Sunday January 13<sup>th</sup> 2008 Ruth 1:1-22 Godly Complaint**

It's easy to feel intimidated by the Bible stories. One can ask oneself 'What place is there for me, in amongst this star-studded gallery of Bible giants – Moses, Mount Sinai, Joshua? What about little old me? Is there any way I can have a significant place?' The story of Ruth is proof to the contrary. She is a stranger, an outsider to the purposes of God. But He takes this everyday life, and weaves it into this big story of God's salvation. Ruth becomes the great-grandmother of King David; thus illustrating that no life is too small, or insignificant that God cannot use it.

**HEILSGESCHICHTE – GOD'S STORY**

**SEELSGESCHICHTE – SOUL STORY, MY STORY, PERSONAL STORY**

For instance in the big story, in the salvation story of Judges in which the story of Ruth is set, God trounces the Midianites. The story of Ruth brings it down to the bitter story of Naomi, returning to Bethlehem with no husband or sons. She is provided for, which shows God's intent equally in the small details. Nothing is wasted, there is no unpromising life, but everything counts. God can take all of this, and He by His grace can bring it into His big story. In the genealogy of Jesus in the gospel of Matthew, there are four rather dubious women would show that no situation is too inauspicious that God cannot use it.

Starting with Naomi, she gets in to the story by complaining. 'Don't call me Naomi, call me 'Mara', because my life has become bitter.' Her complaint is to God, which seems almost blasphemous. But this is how she gets into the story; not in the sense of whingeing, which the Bible speaks against, but in the sense of bringing her real grievances and sadnesses to God. Not only is the complaint tolerated by God, but it can even be the proper stance of someone who takes God seriously. IN fact no to complain would be a sin. To wrestle with your complaints is not a sin, even when it leads to an attempt to put God on trial.

As a pastor Ian is often in the business of assisting the person in making the complaint. It is not his job to defend God, but to encourage the complaint, not to just put a brave face on it. When you take it seriously, it becomes the first step to recovery, to discerning God in your life. If you can't complain, then you won't rejoice either; if you can't weep, then you will never laugh; if you can't register pain, then you will never be around when joy comes. If you can't discern the sadness in your heart, then neither will you discern God's grace when it comes. Which it does for Naomi. When Ruth returns from the threshing-floor with a generous gift from Boaz, we know that grace is at work. And finally when Obed is born, the women shouted 'A boy is born to Naomi', not Ruth, but to Naomi.

Naomi never got an explanation of why she lost her husband and sons. Nor does He condemn her for leaving Israel. But by bringing her complaint to God, she finds herself in a whole set of relationships through which she realises that God is faithfully still about His business. If the complaint had been edited out of the story, rejected as a whinge and unsuitable for a Bible story, it would simply have festered, gone underground and ended up as anger towards everyone.

Next time you hear someone complain, don't just say some Christian platitude. Instead let it be said, let it be prayed. That's why there are so many more songs of lament than ones of praise and thanksgiving. We need to pray these prayers of complaint, for they are actually bold acts of faith, and a prelude to grace.

"Prayers Plainly Spoken" Stanley Hauerwas. £6.99