

# “It’s a Boy: A Wedding and A Baby”

## Address to St Paul’s 27<sup>th</sup> April 2008 based on Ruth 4.

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And now, episode 4 in our mini-series, “Three funerals and a wedding.”

This week’s episode is titled “A wedding and a baby.” OR “It’s a Boy.”

Now, in case you’ve just joined us, let’s revisit the highlights of the story so far.

Previously on “Three Funerals and a Wedding.”

In episode 1, Ken Holt told the story of how Elimelech and his wife Naomi left their home in Bethlehem because of a famine. They went, with their two sons, to live across the border in Moab.

These two sons married two women from Moab. One of these women was named Orpah which Ken informed us, should have been the name of Oprah Winfrey, except for her mother’s bad spelling grades.

The other Moab woman was named Ruth.

In episode one of “Three Funerals and a Wedding” we have the three funerals. All the men die.

Doubtless, we think this is quite tragic. And doubtless it was. But there would have been many back at home in Bethlehem who would not have been surprised that the men died. After all, Moabites were extremely unpopular people (except, maybe, in Moab). We discovered in episode 2 that there was a law in Deuteronomy 23:3 that prevented Moab’s from entering the temple, until 110 generations had passed.

There would have been many quite unsympathetic to the plight of these women. You can hear them saying, with self-righteous judgementalism, “This is what happens when you have mixed marriages.” It was your own fault, they would say. If you’re going to allow Hebrews and Moabites to marry, God is going to punish you.

Fortunately, of course, we don’t have judgemental people like this around today. We wish, eh?

Anyway, with the three funerals over, Naomi decides to go home to Bethlehem and, to cut a long episode short, Ruth decides to go with her.

In episode one, Ken asked us to think about the power of Ruth’s love for her mother-in-law. It goes against the mother-in-law stereotype. Ruth’s love crossed borders and cultures. It was whole-hearted and for the rest of her life.

Surprisingly, Ruth’s profession of love and commitment didn’t make Naomi happy. She wanted her name changed to emphasise how bitter she had become.

Of course, if Naomi had only spoke English instead of Hebrew should would only have had to read her name backwards. Naomi backwards is *I Moan*.

And so we went away for a week. All read the Book of Ruth through from cover to cover and returned for Episode Two in which we discovered that nice guys sometimes do not finish last. Tom Yardley revealed the surprising kindness of Boaz.

Boaz was some relative of Naomi's dead husband, perhaps a nephew. And Ruth follows along behind the reapers in Boaz's fields and gathers up the grain that they missed or dropped. This is called *gleaning*.

Tom noted that something causes Boaz notice Ruth and he makes special arrangements so that she is well looked after.

Naomi doesn't moan about this. She is delighted and encourages Ruth to keep going back to Boaz's fields which she does until the harvest is over.

Then we went away, read the book of Ruth from cover to cover again, and returned to see how Clyde Andrews would deal with episode three.

But first, Kelvin asked us what would Naomi be, if Ruth had not gone back to Bethlehem with her? Naomi would have been ruth-less.

The title for episode three was "A Special Midnight Meeting" which I thought made it sound about as exciting as accountants discussing double entry bookkeeping. In case you hadn't noticed, episode three is more than a little bit romantic. Some might say that a seduction occurs. I mean, Ruth uncovers the feet of the sleeping Boaz! As Clyde said, you can imagine how Hollywood might treat this scene.

Well, whether or not you were disappointed that Clyde avoided the Hollywood spin on this assignation, Clyde tried to get us to see that something more profound, more authentic, more enduring than mere seduction was going on here. Something that we might label as love. The kind of love that is mutually honouring. The kind of love that wants nothing but the best for the other.

The way Boaz responds to Ruth's approach demonstrates something more than she had caught his eye.

And so Ruth goes back to Naomi with the news that she has been treated with great chivalry. Not to mention getting to carry six measures of barley back to Naomi, which I reckon more than anything would have pretty quickly killed the romantic moment.

"I love you Ruth. Here. Put this barley on your back." "Oh, ta!"

And so ended, episode 3.

What will happen next?

Well, since we have all read the book of Ruth cover to cover a number of times, I guess you are not surprised to hear that there is a wedding. And a baby.

But before there can be a wedding, there is a small complication.

It's a complication that doesn't make a whole lot of sense to us in 21<sup>st</sup> century Australia.

In those times, inheritance of land was how one generation provided for the next.

We learned in episode three from Clyde, that if a man died without a son, leaving a widow, his brother was obligated to marry the widow and produce a son. This son would be considered the son of the dead man, not the son of the natural father, his uncle. He would be the substitute son.

The uncle would take possession of the land of the dead brother. And, since wives and children were considered property in those days, the uncle would also take possession of the women and children. They would become his family. And the land would become his land.

Until...

Until he died. Then the land of the dead brother, that is the one who had died before, would pass to the substitute son. While the land of the dead brother, that is the one who just died now, would pass to his other sons.

There'll be a quiz about this later.

Something like this appears to have happened here. Some relative stood between Boaz and Ruth.

That relative had an opportunity to take possession of the land of Naomi's husband. And thus to take possession of Ruth too.

So Boaz does the right thing.

He goes to the city gate, which was where business was done. And by an amazing twist of clever plot-lines, this fellow with the prior claim, this next-of-kin happens to pass by.

Boaz calls him over. We never know this next-of-kin's name. Boaz calls him *friend* but there's a joke in the Hebrew words here. He actually calls him something like "so-and-so".

So Boaz explains the thing. The land is up for sale. The next-of-kin has first claim to redeem the land.

The old so-and-so thinks this sounds like a good way to expand his property investments and says he will have it.

And then Boaz reminds him that the land comes with some strings attached. Namely a widow who is need of a son and heir.

Well, the so-and-so isn't so impressed now. He realises that the land won't stay in his family past his own death. It all sounds like too much trouble, so he passes up the offer.

And, to show he is confirming the deal, he hands over his sandal. As you do.

Now, in episode three, Clyde said we would hear about redemption today. And so we shall.

This transaction in which Boaz and so-and-so took part was an act of redeeming the land.

The word *redeem* literally means to *buy again*. It's a Latin word.

When people went to war in the ancient world, if you won the battle, you got to take plunder. And the victorious army would take people prisoners. Take them home. Put them to work as slaves. It was the reward of victory or, from the other point of view, the cost of defeat.

But sometimes these prisoners could be released if someone would pay a big enough price. That price was called a ransom. And the process of buying a prisoner out of slavery was called redemption. The slave was said to be redeemed. The slave was being *bought again*.

I guess I don't have to join the dots for us to see that this is one meaning we attach to the death of Jesus. We often say that Jesus died as a ransom for many. That his death was redemptive. It freed us from slavery to sin and death. The death of Jesus redeems us from a life of sin and separation from God.

Now there are two ways to look at redemption. Two ways to look at the action of Boaz in redeeming the land, and Ruth with it. Because there is Boaz and the Boy.

Boaz and the Boy.

There are two ways of looking at the action of Jesus in giving his life as a ransom to redeem us. There is Jesus and there is me. Jesus and You.

One way is to look at the transactions.

What is it that Boaz does? What is it that Jesus does?

Boaz swaps sandals. Jesus dies on a cross.

But I said there are two ways to look at this. There is what Boaz does—the sandal swapping action. And there is what happens as result. The outcome. There is the boy.

Boaz does a wonderful thing in redeeming Ruth. But the story could have ended right there. We may never have heard of Boaz or Ruth again. Except for the boy.

Because the boy is the grandfather of another boy. He is the grandfather of a boy named David, who would become the King of Israel.

And this same boy produces a family line that goes all the way to the Messiah. All the way to Jesus.

Why is it that we know this story about Ruth and Boaz? Is it because they are the great-grandparents of King David? Did someone recall this story only when King David became famous?

Was there some program like *Who Do You Think You Are* who researched the history of King David and worked backwards to discover Ruth and Boaz in King David's past?

Do we only know about Boaz and Ruth because of King David?

Or, do we only know about King David, because we know about Ruth and Boaz?

I think it is the second. As important as Boaz's act of redemption is. What is more important is how Ruth and Boaz, and generations after them, lived in **response** to being redeemed.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century over a million Irish people left Ireland for America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand searching for a new life, as a result of the impact of British rule and then the Great Potato Famine.

One of these immigrants was a penniless boy who hid as a stowaway on a ship bound for America. In the middle of the Atlantic the ship hit an iceberg and began to sink, but there was enough time to get everybody into life-boats. Deep down in the bowels of the ship the boy wondered why the ship had stopped and as he came out from his hiding place there was no-one around. He came up on deck just as the captain was about to step into the last seat of the last life-boat. In the highest tradition of the sea, the captain stepped back and put the boy in his place, and as the life-boat was pushed off, he said to the lad: "Never forget what has been done for you".

As the life-boat pulled away, the lad could see the captain standing on the deck, and that vision never left him. He became a successful businessman in America, and when people asked him about the secret of his achievement he always told the story of the captain giving his life for him and how he was urged to never forget what had been done for him. "Whenever I get discouraged and feel negatively about myself," he said, "I recall the vision of what has been done for me and it gives me new courage to be worthy of such a price."

To lay down one's life for another is the supreme sacrifice yet there have been many times during wars or disasters when that sacrifice has been made. Have you ever asked yourself, "could I do that"?

But there's another question. And that is, "how could I ever repay such a sacrifice"? The answer must be that repayment would be impossible. But we would surely have a **responsibility** to take full advantage of such a sacrifice, as did the young stowaway on the sinking ship - he went on to success but he never forgot the price that was paid by another. He never forgot that act of redemption. How wrong it would be to forget that sacrifice. How wrong it would be to devalue it by failing to grasp the new life it provided.

The story of Ruth in episode 4 is about Boaz AND the boy.

Boaz's action in redeeming Ruth had consequences for the way they lived. We know for a fact that the story of what Boaz did was told over and over, down through the generations.

How do we know this fact? Well, we have the book written down. A few thousand years later.

The only way to explain it is to realise that Ruth, and probably Naomi too, told the story of their redemption to their son. This story of redemption and the obligation to live fully and responsibly in the light of that act of redemption... this story was told over and over.

It shaped the character of the boy.

It shaped the character of generations.

It shaped the life of a boy named David, who knew from his great-grandparents how much his character was a consequence of one man's act of redemption.

It shaped the life of the generations beyond King David too. They kept telling this story. Mothers to children.

The family produced Kings. And finally the King of Kings.

You see the act of redemption is only half the story. What Ruth did as a result of being redeemed is the other half of the story.

The story is about Boaz AND the boy.

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I've been managing people in organisations now for the best part of four decades. Every time I join a new organisation I seem to inherit a certain kind of accountant.

It has happened to me again this year.

This kind of accountant is one who knows the accounting rules. They work diligently to produce beautiful rows and columns of numbers that all sum correctly. Left and Right. And up and down.

They know how to do the transactional stuff of accounting. If Boaz had one of those accountants at the city gate, you can be sure the accountant would have checked that the sandals that were swapped, balanced.

Let me reassure you that I want my accounts to balance. But that's only half the story. I want my accounts to provide information that helps me do my job.

At the first Board meeting I attended at VicRelief Foodbank, where I started in January, we received about 20 pages of accounts. Dozens of columns and rows on every page. No number bigger than 8 point.

Beautiful piece of work. Completely useless to the Board.

It's one thing to know the accounting rules well. But that's half the story. The other half is what you DO as a result.

Have you been watching Matthew Lloyd kicking for goal lately? Lovely style. Great balance. Good ball drop. Nice follow through. Can't buy a goal this year.

Watched Buddy Franklin kick for goal? Doesn't run in straight. Forgets to watch the ball onto his boot. Curves the ball in the air. Leading the Coleman medal count.

It's one thing to kick well. But that's half the story. The other half is what you DO as a result.

It's one thing to get the transaction right. But that's only half the story. The other half is what you DO in response to the transaction.

You see, redemption is about what happens, at least as much as it is about how it is transacted.

Jesus gave away his life so that we might live fully within the Kingdom of His Love.

The challenge for us is to do the same. To give our lives away.

When Jesus broke the bread in the Upper Room with the disciples before his death, he gave the bread away.

The bread. The bread that represents his Body. He gave it away. And then he said, "Go and do likewise."

You see, our celebration of Holy Communion is useless, unless it translates into daily actions that show we live responsibly in light of the redemption that has been offered us.

Worse, our failure to live fully responsible redeemed lives is an insult to the One who redeemed us. Could there be a greater sin?

We are called into daily acts of redemption. We are called to give our lives away in the daily work of redeeming a lost world.

You see, the Christian life is not about the HOW of transactions.

God may ask some of us to swap sandals. If that's what it takes to redeem the world.

God may ask some of us to sell all we have and give it to the poor. If that's what it takes to redeem the world.

God may ask some of us to go and live in a foreign country, sacrificing our health, giving our lives away so that communities can be rescued from poverty. If that's what it takes to redeem the world.

God may ask us to give up some of our time to attend a prayer meeting, or drive a senior citizen to a dinner. If that's what it takes to redeem the world.

God may ask us to give up some pride, or show a bit of grace, or hold our tongue. If that's what it takes to redeem the world.

What will God be asking us to do today, and tomorrow, to live redemptively in response to His great love?

Amen.