Sunday 15 March 2026 – Asylum – Beth Keith

Today is Mothering Sunday. And it is also the fourth Sunday in our Lenten cycle of sermons, linked to Lent study-groups, on issues of our Christian faith and social justice. This Sunday's subject is asylum, and Beth Keith finds parallels between the Biblical passages and links to the relationships of care, loyalty, nurture and love that are central to what we celebrate in Mothering Sunday today.

Readings:

Ruth 1:1-18; Luke 10:25-37

Sermon: Asylum – Beth Keith

At first glance, these two stories seem quite different. One is an imaginary story, a parable told by Jesus. The other appears to be a retelling of events within a particular family. One is a made-up story about people on a dangerous road. The other tells of the struggles of a family facing grief, loss, and uncertainty. One it about men, those other about women.

The story of Ruth and Naomi is quite unusual in the Bible - it is a book almost entirely about women. It is a short book focused on two women and their relationship with one another. And whilst women do appear throughout scripture, it is rare for an entire storyline to revolve around them, and rarer still for their voices to be so clearly heard within the text. It tells the story of a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law navigating grief, migration, poverty and uncertainty together. They have lost husbands, lost stability, and are trying to work out how to survive. In that sense, it is perhaps a very fitting reading for Mothering Sunday, a day when we reflect not only on biological motherhood but on relationships of care, loyalty, nurture and love.

But if we look more closely at these two stories, there are some surprising similarities between the story of Ruth and Naomi and Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan. On the surface, the story of Ruth and Naomi appears to be set firmly within a particular time, family and place. Yet the way the story is written suggests that it is doing something more than simply recounting history. The language the author uses contains small narrative clues that hint that this story is meant to be heard a little like a parable a story that carries meaning beyond the events themselves.

For example, the book begins by telling us that a famine occurs in Bethlehem. Bethlehem literally means "the house of bread." So, this 'house of bread' is in famine. And then we are introduced to the family from the clan known as the clan of fruitfulness, and we are told this family from the clan of fruitfulness have become fruitless. These details may be easy to miss in translation, but listeners hearing this in Hebrew would have recognised the deliberate irony and symbolism. The writer is signalling that this is not only a story about a family, but a meaning-making story. It is a type of parable, which brings us closer to the parable Jesus tells.

Both stories involve encounters between different ethnic groups. Between those who saw themselves as God's chosen people and those who were considered outsiders or even enemies. Ruth the Moabite and the Samaritan, our heroes in these stories, would have been seen in this way. So, both stories challenge assumptions about who belongs, who is faithful, and who acts with compassion.

Both stories also involve people who find themselves in danger on the road. Naomi and Ruth are in a desperate situation. They are widowed, poor, and vulnerable. Naomi has already travelled once from Judah to Moab during the famine, and now she must make the journey back again. They face hunger and uncertainty.

In Jesus' parable, we meet a man travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho, a notoriously dangerous road. Bandits often targeted travelers. People listening to Jesus would have known that stopping

for someone could put you at risk as well. The safest option was to keep moving and reach your destination as quickly as possible.

Both stories are about people who choose something difficult. Both our heroes – Ruth and the Samaritan - respond with compassion when it would be easier not to. Ruth had the option to stay in Moab with her own people. Naomi even encourages her to do so. It would have been the sensible choice. But Ruth chooses the harder path. She remains loyal to Naomi and travels with her to Judah, a land she does not know, among people who would likely treat her as an outsider. In Jesus' parable, the Samaritan chooses to stop. Unlike the priest and the Levite who pass by, he interrupts his journey. He risks danger. He cares for the injured man, takes him somewhere safe, and even pays for his ongoing care. Both stories show compassion that is costly.

Today we celebrate Mothering Sunday. For some, this is a joyful day. For others it may be complicated, or even painful. Our experiences of family, care, compassion and nurture are not always straightforward. Within the church, Mothering Sunday has traditionally been less about individual mothers and more about remembering the church as a place of nurture, a community that cares for and sustains us. And again, this may be a place of good experiences but may also have been a place of hurt. We may have experienced great kindness and loyalty within families, churches or communities. We may also know experiences of grief, difficulty, or moments when people walked by on the other side.

What is striking about both of today's stories is that they speak honestly about danger and hardship, but also point toward redemption. Whilst both stories include care and compassion, redemption is perhaps the more central meaning or shape of these stories.

The book of Ruth is very short, only 87 verses in total. Yet the Hebrew word for "redeemer" or "redemption," and related forms of that word, appear 23 times. 23 three times in 87 verses. Anyone hearing this story in Hebrew would notice the repetition immediately. The writer is making something very clear: this is a story about redemption. At first it appears to be about survival, about food, family and hardship. But beneath the surface it is asking a deeper question: what does it mean to be redeemed?

The same is true in Jesus' parable. The story of the Good Samaritan begins not with a question about kindness or prejudice, but with a question about salvation. A lawyer asks Jesus: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus responds by pointing him back to the law: love God, and love your neighbour as yourself. And then the man asks a second question: "Who is my neighbour?" His response is rooted in his question how can I be sure that I am saved? Jesus responds not with a rule, but with a story, a story that shifts the focus away from the man's self-concern and toward the needs of others.

And noticeably, in both stories, the person who brings redemption is not the person we might expect. Naomi's future is restored through the loyalty and courage of Ruth, the foreigner, the Moabite. In Jesus' parable, the wounded Jewish traveller is saved by the Samaritan, the outsider. If these stories are about redemption, then the message is quite striking. You cannot redeem yourself. Redemption comes through those we might least expect, those we have been taught to see as outsiders.

These stories begin with individual encounters, two women supporting one another, or one traveler helping another. But the implications are much wider than that. At the end of the book of Ruth we discover that the story does not end simply with Naomi surviving. Through Ruth and Boaz, a child is born. Naomi's family line continues, a family line eventually leads to the birth of Jesus. In other words, the story suggests that the line that leads to the Redeemer is itself redeemed through the actions of a foreign woman, Ruth the Moabite. It is perhaps not

surprising, then, that Jesus tells stories that challenge boundaries between insider and outsider. These stories are part of his own family history.

During our Lent course this year, we have been reflecting on some of the challenges present in our society at the moment. This week we have are thinking particularly about asylum and migration. Across our country we have seen tensions rise in recent years. Much of the public conversation around migration and asylum has become increasingly polarized. There is language that encourages us to see people primarily as categories — as "us" and "them," insiders and outsiders. We hear rhetoric that suggests some people belong and others do not. That some people are a burden. That some people are a threat. That some people deserve help while others should simply go elsewhere.

But the stories we have heard today challenge that way of thinking very directly. In the book of Ruth, the person who becomes the agent of redemption is Ruth, the foreigner, the migrant, the Moabite. The one who might have been viewed with suspicion is the very person through whom loyalty and faithfulness are revealed. In Jesus' parable, the hero of the story is the Samaritan, the outsider. Both stories overturned the expectations of their listeners. They invite us to see the possibility that the people we might instinctively see as "other" may in fact be the very people through whom God's compassion and grace become visible.

Let me ask you to try a small exercise. If you feel comfortable doing so, raise your hand if someone in your immediate family, a parent, grandparent, spouse, or child, was not born in this country. Now keep your hand up if we extend that just a little wider, cousins, aunts, uncles, great grandparents, perhaps someone a little further back in the family.

Have a look around. So many of our families are shaped by migration. By movement across borders. By people who arrived from somewhere else and made a home here. Migration is not a new story. It runs throughout our histories, and through the whole of scripture

Abraham leaves his homeland. Joseph is taken into Egypt. The people of Israel become refugees. Ruth crosses borders in search of survival. Jesus is taken as c achild by his parents into Egypt to escape violence. Time and again the Bible reminds God's people: remember that you were once strangers in a foreign land. And that memory is meant to shape how God's people treat those who arrive among them. So when we hear conversations today about asylum seekers, migrants, or refugees, the question the gospel asks us is not: "What category do they belong to?" The question the gospel asks is: Where is the neighbour in this story?

Are we the ones who pass by because it is easier not to get involved? Are we the ones offering care and compassion? Or might we be the ones on the roadside ourselves, dependent on the kindness of others? The challenge of Jesus' parables is not simply that we should go out and save others. It is also to recognise that the people we imagine ourselves helping may, in ways we cannot yet see, also be the people through whom God brings help, wisdom and renewal to us. The neighbour is not defined by nationality or background. The neighbour is revealed through compassion. And sometimes the neighbour who saves us is the very person we least expected.

When we walk the roads of our own lives, the roads of our neighbourhoods, our communities, our country, what kind of people will we choose to be? Will we pass by, keeping our distance from those whose stories feel complicated or unfamiliar? Or will we allow our hearts to be interrupted by compassion, by courage, and by the possibility that God is already at work in the lives of people we may not yet fully understand?

On this Mothering Sunday, we give thanks for those who have nurtured us, mothers, fathers, grandparents, friends, neighbours, and members of the church community. We give thanks for

people who have stopped along the road for us. People who have shown loyalty when life was difficult. People who have cared when we needed it most.

And perhaps today we are invited to remember something else as well. That the family of God has always been wider than we imagine. That redemption often arrives through unexpected people. And the neighbour who helps us, may in fact turn out to be another member of our family.

Amen.