

A Sermon preached by Martin Tanner in St Mary's, Market Drayton on Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> November 2016 at 10.00am

## **SS8 The Book of Ruth and the 'Theology of Boundaries'**

Ruth 2 v15-23

The sermon series on the Book of Ruth has not ended, *yet!* In the past week I have been reading and I have learnt new things which I share with you now. No claim by me to originality.

What I say comes from an article in the SU Bible Reading Notes 'Encounter with God' and was written by Mark Powley who is the Principal of the Yorkshire Ministry Course and formerly the curate at the church my daughter attends in Leeds.

He speaks of the "theology of boundaries" and says that God gives boundaries to bless us.

So let's start in the Book of Ruth and then see this idea everywhere else in the Bible.

**Boaz** (Ruth 2 v15) instructs his workers at harvest time NOT to harvest to the very edge of the field but to leave a boundary of uncut barley and wheat so the poor, the homeless, the widow and the foreigner can glean and have something to eat.

It is a REGULATION of the Law in Leviticus 19 v9-10 that this practice be observed but **Boaz CHOSE to live within the boundary of the Law.** And this way he blessed hungry Ruth when she turned up in his field.

Likewise, **Ruth** after being widowed, CHOSE to limit her own future options by leaving her own country and going with Naomi and supporting Naomi wherever she went. *"Where you go, I will go. Where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God will be my God"* (Ruth 1 v16) She placed a boundary on herself.

Further on in the Bible we read of **Daniel** who places a boundary of what he will eat as a witness. He refused to defile himself eating the rich food and wine of a pagan King and would only eat vegetables and drink water and famously in Daniel 1 v15, at the end of a trial period on his diet, *"he looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food."*

Linked with this is the **collection of mana** in the wilderness. The people of Israel were to gather ONLY ENOUGH FOR EACH DAY. If they gathered enough all were fed but if they gathered too much mana then the mana rotted and stank (Exodus 16). **The gift of daily mana came with a boundary.**

(2)

**In fact the WHOLE OF THE BIBLE can be seen as a story told in relation to boundaries.** The Garden of Eden, Paradise itself, is a gift with a boundary: *"Eat whatever you like BUT DO NOT eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil"* (Genesis 3 v3)

We are free but not free without limits.

The serpent, the one who opposes God and doesn't like God-given boundaries and rebels against them, **then suggests that that life within this boundary is pitiful and diminished and second-rate.**

His great lie is that BEYOND this God-given boundary is the 'true' place of abundance and freedom.

**But this IS a lie and is NOT the truth.**

It becomes very clear that when one chooses to live without regard to God's boundaries there is NOT abundance and freedom. In fact to live outside of God's boundaries is death and God's judgement on the serpent is: *"Cursed be the ground because of you"* (Genesis 3 v17)

Pain, toil and suffering all enter the world when the God-given boundary is crossed and the serpents advice is heeded.

In the past I have explain the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20) as *"just a few boundaries so we may enjoy everything else, so we may live life to the full."* The Ten Commandments are NOT a draconian list of unwarranted restriction but the exact opposite.

They are like a parent to who says to their child,

***"Stop on the pavement, look both ways, listen, then cross over the road"***

A few restrictions so the child will not get hurt crossing the road but can cross it safely and enjoy what is on the other side, the park, the swings, the swimming pool.

**BUT don't conclude that such rules are ONLY for children.** If adults do not stop and look and listen they will be hurt by on-coming traffic and they will not cross the road safely and enjoy what is on the other side, either.

**BOUNDARIES BLESS US.**

**Likewise, for a fulfilled life, all we have to do is:**

not murder, not commit adultery, not lie or steal nor spend time desiring what others have and endlessly consuming, take a day off a week, honour your parents, worship God.

(3)

**What LOOKS negative is actually very POSITIVE.**

Boundaries are NOT the bars of a prison restricting our potential and limiting our freedom as the serpent says. INSTEAD, **and here is the original idea from Mark Powley**, instead they are like the LINES ON A FOOTBALL PITCH or any other sports pitch.



What do such lines do? **-They create space for individual creativity and flourishing.**

We are fortunate to live in an age of two footballing greats, Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo. Two of the most talented and expressive footballers ever. **BUT, they can ONLY express their brilliance WITHIN THE LINES, inside the boundaries.** The moment they take the ball over a boundary line the game stops and a throw-in or corner will be needed to re-start the game.

And if there were (note correct use of the subjunctive tense: *the verb in a conditional clause ALWAYS takes the subjunctive 'were' not 'was'*) no lines, no boundaries, a game of football would be near impossible, certainly not possible without a huge number of arguments and disputes. **The boundary lines create space for creativity and flourishing.**

And what is true of football is true of US, you and me: **We need boundaries for our own flourishing.**

It is in the DNA of creation.

It is in the wisdom of God that when God gives us a gift HE ALSO GIVES a boundary.

**And the boundary is a "SECOND GIFT" to protect us and allow us to flourish.**

Embrace the boundaries!

Flourish!

It's the best theology there is!