

SHELTER



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Reflections on the book of Ruth

Tony Horsfall

INTRODUCTION

Shortly before the lockdown began, my good friend Tony Horsfall took the decision to accompany his wife Evelyn into a care home in Barnsley not far from where they live. Evelyn is in the later stages of terminal cancer and could no longer be cared for at home. After a brief spell in a hospice she was transferred to the care home and Tony also decided to leave his home and become a resident there. During the time since then Tony has been regularly posting a 'blog' on FaceBook about his experiences in the care home and how God has been faithfully meeting their needs. Over a period of 15 days Tony has posted these reflections on the Old Testament book of Ruth. They contain many references to his personal circumstances in the care home. I originally thought of taking these out to focus on the story of Ruth. However, Tony said he was happy for them to be left in and they certainly bring to life Tony's reflections. They show how words of scripture written thousands of years ago can be applied to our daily lives, even in the most testing circumstances. I know these reflections were a blessing to me and many of Tony's friends and FaceBook followers. I trust they will be to you as well.

David Tanner

1. FINDING REFUGE

Shortly before we came to Cherry Trees I had felt a nudge from God to read and study the book of Ruth. I brought a few books with me to help, but initially my emotions were all over the place and I could not focus my thoughts. I had to rest for a while and allow myself to be carried by God's love. Slowly my hunger for scripture returned and recently I have found great comfort in this ancient little story. It tells how God cared and provided for Ruth and Naomi in their need and desperation, and how his providential plan for them was even then working itself out in their adversity.

In particular the thought of God being our refuge, and our finding shelter beneath his wings, has sustained me and given me hope (Ruth 2:12). This Care Home has been for us a place of refuge and safety during these difficult days when we have been cut off from friends and family, from church and all that is familiar. Furthermore, the kindness shown by Boaz towards Ruth has been replicated in the care we have received from the staff here, and which has moved us deeply. These hard-working and compassionate carers have often been devalued by society, but we have seen their truth first hand. But most important is the reminder that in times of need we can find a place of safety in God. He can become our source of security when all else has been removed. As Jesus said, he wants to enfold us in his love like a mother hen encircles and protects her chicks. We of course must be willing to turn to him for refuge. If we do, he will not turn us away.

By the way, do pray for God's protection on this place. I heard yesterday that this is the only Care Home in the Barnsley area without a case of corona virus. We want it to stay that way.

2. LIFE IN A FOREIGN LAND

During this time of being resident with Evelyn in the Care Home I have begun studying the book of Ruth, and it has spoken deeply to our situation. It is a story of love and loss, and of the providence of God bringing good out of tragedy. In other words, it is a book of hope for anyone for whom life is hard.

The setting is the time of the Judges, a bleak period in the history of Israel characterised by rebellion, disobedience and wicked sinfulness - not dissimilar to our own world. It seems that Elimelech and his wife Naomi, with their two sons, found living in pagan Moab a better alternative than staying in sinful Israel under the judgement of God through famine. The letter of Ruth breathes a very different atmosphere to Judges - here we find faith and love, loyalty and kindness, all generated by a living faith in God. It reminds us that at the bleakest of times God preserves a people for himself.

But life was not easy for the little family during their exile. First Elimelech died, then both sons, Mahlon and Chilion. How devastating this must have been for Naomi, and the two daughters-in-law. Their world collapsed and their future was in the balance. How would they respond? Would they turn to God in faith, or turn away in anger?

We are living through a period of time when death stalks our land and thousands of families have felt its icy grip. Grief is the predominant emotion in 2020, and it comes in many forms, not just the grief of bereavement. Loss, and the attendant sadness, is everywhere.

For some there has been the loss of jobs and economic security. Overnight, businesses have failed and careers been put on hold. Families struggle to make ends meet. Long cherished plans for marriage, holidays and birthdays have been shelved. We have lost many of the joys of life like sporting events, nights out at the pub, shopping trips, meetings friends for coffee and so on. Social isolation has robbed us of our nearest and dearest and made us feel lonely and cut off. We have died many deaths.

So how will we respond? This is a searching time of both our character and our faith. We can become full of self-pity and turn away from God. Or we can recognise in all that is happening a wake-up call to our nation and the world and instead turn towards him again in humble repentance and faith.

3. WHERE YOU GO I WILL GO

When Naomi hears that God has once again blessed Israel with a good harvest she is keen to return home. Knowing she has nothing to offer her daughter-in-laws, she urges them to stay in Moab. Orpah agrees to this plan, but Ruth refuses to leave Naomi. Her love and commitment are expressed in these beautiful words:

“Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God (1:16).”

We have heard many stories during the pandemic of this kind of sacrificial love, for example care workers moving in to live with their residents for weeks on end, or nurses leaving their families to stay nearer to their hospitals and so they do not pass on any infection to their loved ones. There will be many other less well publicised acts of love that we may never hear anything about.

Evelyn and I have been married for 47 years, and we have shared so much together. We have travelled together, lived together and shared our faith together. When the time came for her to go into full time care the ban on visitors to such homes had just come into effect. I could not bear to think of saying goodbye to her at the ambulance doors and perhaps never seeing her again. My brother-in-law suggested I could also go with her as a resident, something I had not thought of but which seemed to be a solution - if such a place could be found. A friend texted, “I hope wherever Ev goes you can go also.” Then it worked out for us to stay together, first in the hospice and now at Cherry Trees. Where you go, I will go.

I hope I am not giving the impression that this was some great romantic gesture on my part, although I do love Evelyn deeply. It was the least painful option, but it has given us the chance to be together for longer, and although it is not easy, it is the right thing to do for now. I am also aware that for many the sacrificial part has come, not in being their loved ones, but being painfully separated from them in their hour of need.

I am sure you will have your own opportunity to express sacrificial love in some way during these unusual days - for your family, your friends and even complete strangers. It is interesting to see how in the midst of adversity love and kindness are flourishing. “God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God lives in them (1John 4:16).”

4. AN ANGRY GOD?

There are two common reactions to misfortune. One is to blame God (Why me?), the other is to blame oneself (God is punishing me). Naomi's response to her troubles is the latter, to assume that God has caused her difficulties. "Don't call me Naomi (meaning pleasant)," she says, "call me Mara (meaning bitter) because the Almighty has made my life very bitter (1:20)."

Our theology is closely related to our basic concept of God. If we perceive that God is capricious, cruel, quick to take offence and so on, then of course we will assume any suffering we face is because he is displeased with us. This seems to have been Naomi's understanding. But is she correct? I think not.

She will soon come face to face with the sheer kindness and grace of God and begin to realise that God is more loving than she ever imagined. The Almighty is not schizophrenic, angry one moment and kind another! No, he is consistently good. Furthermore, to say that God was behind her misfortune is to say that the lives of Elimelech, Chilion and Mahlon did not matter at all. They died simply to teach Naomi a lesson. That leaves us with a rather grotesque view of God.

All we can say is that in a fallen world bad things happen to good people as much as to anyone else. The death of the three men was not directly caused by God. Such faulty thinking served only to make her bitter, not better. She could have known the comfort of God had she believed more in a loving, merciful Father.

One of the things that is always developing is our concept of God, and for many of us this means daring to believe that God is good and kindly disposed towards us. This is especially important in times of suffering. Rather than being driven away from a God whom we imagine is upset with us, we can take refuge beneath the wings of a God whose loving heart waits to welcome us into the comfort of his grace and mercy. He is after all the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort (2 Corinthians 1:3). We can comfort others with the comfort we ourselves have received.

5. IN HEAVENLY LOVE ABIDING

A much respected friend shared his conviction that God will bring something really special out of these present sufferings in my future ministry. I do not disagree, but had to reply that at present I cannot see the future, it is shrouded in mist. It is as if there is no horizon to be seen. My diary is testament to this fact. There no entries for the months ahead, only blank pages.

I guess Naomi and Ruth must have felt this way as they trudged their way back to Bethlehem. They had no prospects whatsoever. Widowed and penniless, defenceless and vulnerable, they had no home to go to and no idea how they would survive. If only they had known what God had in store for them they would have returned rejoicing with a lightness of step. As it was they were downcast and weary, like the two on the Emmaus road. Naomi sums it up well: “I went out full but I am returning empty.”

This morning a hymn comes mind from the past that has rescued me before when all has seemed lost. I wonder if you have noticed a revival of some of the classic hymns from the church’s past, a searching for words and music with depth? ‘In heavenly love abiding’ by Latitia Waring (1823-1910) is worthy of such a renaissance. Convinced of the security we have in God’s love during changing circumstances, she pens these heart strengthening and hope giving words:

Green pastures are before me
Which yet I have not seen
Bright skies will soon be o’er me
Where the dark skies have been.
My hope I cannot measure,
My path to life is free,
My Saviour has my treasure,
And he will walk with me.

I wonder if you feel like the future is shrouded in mist, that there is so much you cannot see? Let’s encourage one another today with the reminder that God knows the plans he has for us, not to harm us but to prosper us, and to give us a hope and a future (Jeremiah 29:11). One day, like Naomi and Ruth, we will look back in wonder at how he has woven together together the strands of our lives for his glory. For the time being, let’s press on, one step at a time, trusting in the goodness of God and resting in his love.

6. FULL OR EMPTY?

Naomi's words have a deep resonance about them, don't they? "I went out full but I am returning empty." We feel her pain and her heartache. We sense her loss.

Of course she is referring not just to her financial status. When she and her husband Elimelech had left for Moab they were well-off, full of confidence, bursting with hopes and dreams. Then life had cruelly robbed them of everything and she was returning to Bethlehem humbled and chastened, emptied of pride and status, with her tail between her legs.

Naturally we would all prefer to be full rather than empty, but which state is more helpful spiritually? Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matt 5:3)." The implication is clear. God's work can take place in us more effectively when we are stripped of the encumbrances of pride and self-reliance.

We are reminded that in the incarnation Jesus emptied himself, stepping down from the glory of heaven to take human form and embrace the disposition of a servant (Philippians 2:7). In so doing he demonstrated a vital spiritual principle, that the way up is in fact down.

Present circumstances have robbed us of much of the 'fullness' of what normally makes up our lives. We have all been restricted and limited, we all feel loss and grief. If we allow it, this emptying can create a larger space in our lives for God. And he can fill the vacuum that has been created in our souls.

In returning empty handed Naomi and Ruth placed themselves at the mercy of God. They became qualified for Divine Assistance, and soon they would experience the restoring generosity of the Almighty. They would discover his 'fullness', a fullness not based upon self achievement and human accomplishment but upon divine grace and mercy.

Such fullness is available to us all, even if first we must be emptied. As the apostle Paul put it, "In Christ all the fullness of God dwells in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in him (Colossians 2:9)."

7. SWEET PROVIDENCE

Providence refers to the way in which God orders the events of our lives so that his good purpose for us is being fulfilled in the details of our daily lives. Things don't just happen by chance or even coincidence. They are shaped by a Guiding Hand. This is a truth I have come to value greatly over the last few years.

The story of Ruth beautifully illustrates this truth. Indeed commentator David Atkinson says that, 'If there is one theme more than any other which dominates the book of Ruth, it is that of the over-ruling providence of God, and our human dependence on him.' And again, 'Providence says that God is there, God cares, God rules, and God provides. Faith in such a God undergirds every chapter of Ruth.'

When the two women arrive back in Bethlehem their first concern is to find a way to survive. Ruth suggests that she might join the gleaners working in the harvest fields. The Jewish law made provision for the poorest people to pick up the grain left by the harvesters, so Ruth did what she needed to do - she went to join them in the back-breaking work. By chance ('it just so happened that') she found herself working in a field that belonged to Boaz, a distant relative of Elimelech, except she did not know of this man's existence or the connection between them. But it wasn't just a lucky break. She had been guided that morning by God and what began as a chance encounter would turn out to be, in the providence of God, a life-changing moment.

I feel our being here at Cherry Trees is providential. We did none of the normal planning or research that one would do before moving into a Care Home. We didn't visit the place, choose a room or read reports about its performance. We didn't even know where it was, and we were reluctant to come. There was no time, it was an emergency, and this place was suggested to us. Yet now we are here we can recognise that God led us and this is the right fit for us. We are even daring to believe that God has a purpose in our being here beyond receiving nursing care for Evelyn.

I wonder how you are discerning the hand of God in your circumstances at this time? Probably some things have not worked out as you expected. Can you see how God has overruled? Perhaps some things have happened unexpectedly for the better. Can you see God's provision in that for you? Has God closed one door but opened another? What good is coming out of what has happened to you?

8. GENEROUS PROVISION

In the providence of God Ruth found herself in the right place at the right time. Even as she is gleaning Boaz arrives and immediately notices the young stranger at work in his fields. At this point all he knows is that she is a Moabitess with a reputation for hard work, kindness and faith. He is moved to help her in several ways, and the kindness of an unknown stranger is God's way of providing for, and protecting, Ruth and Naomi. It is more than they could ever have imagined possible.

Boaz helps Ruth in several ways. He provides food and refreshment for her, and instructed his men to make sure her gleaning was unusually productive. He included her among his regular team of gleaners, and made sure she was not molested. At the end of the day she returns home with a generous amount of grain, to the delight of her mother-in-law. Providence and provision seem to go hand in hand, and in these uncertain times we can take heart that God is watching over us.

When Evelyn and I joined the Overseas Missionary Fellowship In 1975 it was a faith mission and we were required to empty our bank balance, small as it was, into the common pool. We learnt early on that God is our provider, and that he will supply all our needs. That does not mean it is always easy, or that we do not worry occasionally, but we do know that God can be trusted. We have learnt to live simply and to be content. We have lacked for nothing.

Way back in March we purchased a reclining chair because of Evelyn's decreasing mobility. Someone mentioned a local cancer charity might help us towards the purchase, so I sent them a short email outlining our circumstances, then promptly forgot about the request. Soon after our arrival at Cherry Trees we received a letter from them with, to my surprise, a cheque for £500. Not only was the gift a significant amount, but the timing of it reminded us that even here God will supply all we need, and not just financially.

Many of us will be conscious of financial needs at this time, with less income but the same bills to pay. Others will feel lonely and isolated, perhaps even afraid of what the future holds. Some will be struggling emotionally or mentally. Whatever our need God can meet that need, not in some magical way that requires no faith or removes any challenge from our lives, but in a way that means we must learn to trust him and wait for his good timing. A faithful God will not fail us.

9. TERMS OF ENDEARMENT

I'm learning a lot of things during this time at Cherry Trees. One important lesson for me has been how to address people warmly. This has come about by watching some of the carers here in their interactions with the residents, in particular two of the ladies on the night shift.

When Judy (not her real name) comes on duty the first thing she does is to go down the corridor and knock on each door, sharing a warm word of greeting with each person. "Hi Margaret," she may say, "how are you tonight? I've missed you. It's good to see you." Her warmth and sincerity cannot be denied, and the joy in her voice is unmistakable.

Jenny (also not her real name) is a bundle of joy and when she arrives the whole place gets a lift. She has a wonderful vocabulary of expressions that communicate love and acceptance - dear, darling, sweetheart, chicken, my lovely, to name a few. She makes everyone feel special, myself included.

I notice that Boaz also took time to greet his workers, and with a few well chosen words communicate his appreciation of them and desire that they would be blessed by God. "The Lord be with you!" he called out. "The Lord bless you," they replied. (2:4)

Psychologists speak about "unconditional positive regard" as a basic attitude towards clients and I think as God's people we should do no less. How we address people matters. It should of course be natural and in line with our own personality, but if we can communicate warmth and acceptance, worth and value, then we will be speaking words of life.

That's not to say that the next time you see me you can call me 'my little chicken'. Context is everything.

PS You may not recognise me anyway. After so long in lockdown my hair is like Einstein's, my eyebrows like Dennis Healey, and my tummy like Billy Bunter.

10. A GLIMMER OF HOPE

Ruth's report of her encounter with the kind stranger named Boaz stirs a memory deep within Naomi of a distant relative on Elimelech's side of the family with the same name. If it is the same person, then there is hope, for he would have the right under Jewish law to redeem them - that is to pay off their debts, buy back any land that has been lost and even take Ruth as his wife. "That man is our close relative," says Naomi, "he is one of our kinsman redeemers (2:20)."

A sense of hope is vital to our wellbeing in times of stress and difficulty. When we lose hope we easily fall into depression and despair. It is important that we can find reasons for hope to keep our spirits buoyant.

The very nature of God gives us hope, for he is called 'the God of hope' and the history of Israel was filled with examples of how time and again he came to the rescue of his people when all seemed lost. So the apostle Paul encourages us, " May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him (Rom 15:13)."

Scripture also reminds us to keep hoping. The Psalmist writes, "Weeping may tarry for a night, but joy comes in the morning (42:5)." Yes, we will shed our tears, and the pain of grief or loss or sadness may linger but dawn will come eventually. We will find a way through, and light will shine again.

Even when it comes to death, the greatest enemy of all, we are not without hope. We can face bereavement and final separation with hope in our hearts because Christ has conquered death. "I am the resurrection and the life," he says, "He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die (John 11:25-26)."

Today is VE Day, and in some form it will be celebrated here at Cherry Trees. This weekend the BBC are showing the film, *The Darkest Hour*, the story of Churchill and the Second World War. Despite its artistic licence, it tells a wonderful story of holding on to hope when all seems lost. The songs of Vera Lynn gave hope to many soldiers. 'We'll meet again' is a classic expression of hope. And what is 'You'll Never Walk Alone' but a song to give is hope in the midst of the pandemic?

The kindness of Boaz was the trigger that rekindled hope in Naomi and Ruth. We each have the ability to encourage one another through our words, actions and prayers. We can also encourage our own hearts too by choosing to trust in God in our times of darkness. The darkest hour is often just before the dawn.

11. A GOOD MAN

A few years back there was a lot of debate about masculinity and what it means to be a Christian man. We need look no further than Boaz to see faith at work in a man's life. He reminds me of Barnabas, the son of encouragement, who is described simply as 'a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith' (Acts 10:24). In reflecting on his story in the book of Ruth, three things stand out to me about Boaz.

He is a successful man

He is described as a man of standing (2:1), a term which suggests he had done well in life and was respected in society. Boaz was not a priest or a prophet, nor a warrior or champion of Israel. He seems to have been a farmer/businessman who was hardworking and industrious and whose faith was lived out in the realm of business and commerce. This integration of faith and daily life is characteristic of mature faith that glorifies God.

He is a spiritual man

His faith in God is real and deep and impacts how he treats his workers as well as the poor. He seeks to apply scripture to his daily life and to live by its principles with integrity despite the cost. His life is soaked in prayer and he brings the blessing of God with him wherever he goes. Any goodness or kindness he displays is a result of the Spirit at work within him. His character reflects the character of his God who is kind and merciful.

He is a sensitive man

Unlike many men, he is in tune with his own feelings and those of others. He is sensitive to the plight of Ruth as she gleans in the field, and makes provision for her protection. When she comes to him at night he refuses to take advantage of her vulnerability and seeks to protect her reputation. Sensitivity is not a sign of weakness, but of strength. Doing the right thing and protecting the weak often requires courage and great inner strength.

I cannot read the story of Boaz without being challenged as to my own spiritual maturity and the integration of my faith to my daily life. This is the same for each of us, whether male or female. The challenges of the present time provide us with a wonderful opportunity to live out our faith in a way that really matters and blesses others. We too are called to be generous and kind, compassionate and caring.

12. THROWING YOURSELF ON MERCY

I wonder if you have ever been really desperate? I mean so desperate and needy that you would throw yourself completely on the mercy of another person and shamelessly begged for help? I'm not sure I have, although in coming to Cherry Trees we came very close to that kind of desperation. Certainly we have become dependent on the kindness of others when it comes to Evelyn's care. We have nothing to offer in return except our gratitude. It is a humbling place to be.

Naomi and Ruth have come to a place of desperation, and the visit of Ruth to the wine press late at night reflects their panic. In the cultural context Ruth asking Boaz to cover her with his mantle was not an invitation to sexual activity but a plea that he would show mercy to her and act as redeemer (Hebrew goel). This audacious plan depends on Boaz being both the man of integrity they believe him to be and as generous as they suspect him to be. They are not disappointed. Although there is a technical detail to be sorted out first (there is another possible redeemer with a prior claim), Boaz assures Ruth that he is willing to act as her kinsman-redeemer. "I will do for you all that you ask," he says (3:11).

Mercy is one of the great theological words, but it is often overshadowed in contemporary Christianity by its sister word, grace. Yet mercy always comes first and precedes grace in the order of salvation. God is under no obligation to save us, and we have no claims upon him. We can only cast ourselves on his mercy and hope for his generous and kind response. That he is willing to take us under his wing is mercy; that from that position of acceptance he chooses to be favourable towards us is grace.

In coming to the aid of Naomi and Ruth, Boaz gives us an example of what it is to be merciful, a quality to be integrated into our own lives. If we have received mercy then we must show mercy. The mercy of God, however, is far greater than anything shown by Boaz since it reaches to the deepest depths of human need, without limit and without constraint. He shows his mercy to 'thousands' (Exodus 33:6-7).

In the 1970s a new wave of worship began in New Zealand with the introduction of Scripture in Song. One of my favourites was based on Ruth 3:9 and expressed musically this casting of ourselves upon the mercy of God:

Cover me, cover me,
Extend the border of thy mantle over me
Because Thou art my nearest kinsman,
Cover me, cover me, cover me.

Perhaps that is the response God is looking for from us today? We will not be turned away. He will cover us with his unconditional love and limitless mercy. He will redeem us. As we worship today, albeit in isolation from others, let gratitude for the mercy and grace of God well up within us again.

13. REDEMPTIVE LOVE

To take responsibility for another person's debts, mistakes and future is a big ask, but that is what was required under the law for anyone willing to act as kinsman-redeemer (goel). It was a costly undertaking and if they were able, not all were willing because of the sacrifice it entailed.

In the story of Ruth we are introduced to a redeemer with a greater right than Boaz. At first he is attracted to the possibility of extending his land portfolio, but then draws back at the thought of taking responsibility for Naomi and Ruth, so he withdraws. He is able, but not willing. For him, they would not be a good investment.

This provides a sharp contrast with Boaz who is both able and willing. He steps forward with a guarantee that he will buy back any land that has been lost, pay off any debts, and assume responsibility for the future of his poverty stricken relatives. Boaz, of course, is not motivated simply by obedience to the law (doing what is right), or by extending his possessions (personal gain). No, he is motivated to get involved by the highest motivation of all, that of love - love for God, but also love for Ruth, the young Moabitess. He steps forward to become their Redeemer, and bears witness to his good intention before the village elders.

In this great act of mercy and underserved kindness Boaz foreshadows the redemption provided for us by Jesus at the cross. Indeed, this Old Testament picture provides us with a rich insight to what God has done for us in Christ. He has taken responsibility for us by paying off the debt of our sin, by restoring to us all that has been lost by our foolishness and shame, and by making surety for our future. What grace in this! What a reversal of our fortunes. Those of us who had not received mercy have now received mercy!

This awareness that God in Christ has taken full responsibility for me has come home to me for the very first time today. Not only has he dealt with my past, but he has secured my future. He is my Redeemer, and he has not only paid off my debt but underwritten my present and future need. And all this because he loves me! Unworthy as I am, I am the object of his affection and the recipient of his generosity. He is the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me (Galatians 2:20). And nothing can separate me from his love or his intention to do good in my life.

Wherever you find yourself today, in whatever circumstances you may be, take heart from this great truth and say with Job, "I know that my Redeemer lives!"

14. HAPPY EVER AFTER?

Every story needs a happy ending, and the book of Ruth closes with the marriage of Boaz and Ruth. How excited Naomi must have been to see what God had done for them and how far he had brought them. Her prayers had been answered.

Marriage is a covenant relationship made before God with promises and obligations. It is based on the covenant relationship between God and his people. Just as God loves his people with a faithful, enduring love (Hebrew *hesed*), so marriage is to be built around the security of loyal love. This is behind Paul's teaching on marriage in Ephesians 5:22-33. "Husbands love your wives as Christ loves the church," he says.

The New Testament has 3 words for love - *eros* (sexual love), *philia* (friendship love) and *agape* (sacrificial love). A good marriage has all three ingredients although at any time one may be more important than the others. As marriages mature with age, friendship and the willingness to sacrifice become more important.

After more than a month at Cherry Trees I have to remind myself why I am here. It is because of the promises we made to be with each other for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health. This is how our love for God and each other is to be expressed now. It is not at all how we imagined it would be, but this is the reality we are called to embrace. Of course being together in this way is a great privilege, and it has deepened our love. There have been moments of real intimacy when we have been able to talk in depth about things that matter. But most of the time it is quite ordinary, and we chit chat, sit in happy silence, watch mundane TV, talk to the carers and so on. Occasionally there are moments of mutual frustration! And so the days pass by.

I wonder nowadays if people enter into relationships too quickly and break them too easily. Our experience is that when we persevere at relationships they become deeper and sweeter. But you have to persevere through the stormy, turbulent times to find those calm, peaceful waters! Every marriage will be tested.

I guess the lockdown period and working from home places a strain on the best of marriages as people are forced to spend more time together, and at close quarters.

Hopefully that can lead to honest sharing and deeper communication that in the end will strengthen and enrich the relationship.

15. SEEING THE BIGGER PICTURE

I remember visiting Chatsworth House, one of Britain's most famous stately homes, and marvelling at the majestic trees strategically placed throughout the grounds. It occurred to me that whoever planted those trees had never seen them in their full glory.

Landscape gardeners plant for the future, not the present. They know their work will be best enjoyed by generations still to come.

The story of Ruth and Boaz is wonderful in itself, but it's true glory is in what happened afterwards. God blessed them with a son, Obed. He in turn had a son, Jesse, who became the father of David, the king of Israel who was also the ancestor of Jesus, the Messiah - great David's greater son. David Atkinson comments, "it is in the ordinariness of the events of lives of ordinary people that God is working his purpose out."

Our lives have meaning in the here and now, and may well have significance that we are not aware of, some of which will only become apparent in the future. This is our legacy. We too live on in our children and our children's children. We may never know how our lives have impacted others, or how our example has encouraged them. Our odds and action continue to bear fruit. What we can be sure of is that our little story is part of God's Bigger Story. We have a place in history.

On a recent edition of Antiques Roadshow one of the presenters was shown a letter written by a soldier in WW2 to his young wife, to be given to her in the event of his death. Sadly, he was killed in action and the letter was delivered so that his wife knew of his great love for her. His descendants preserved the letter, and when she read it live on TV the presenter broke down in tears. Seventy five years later she was being impacted by the words of a man writing in a trench in some foreign field who will never know that his words would live on in this way.

Gaining this kind of perspective can energise us when times are hard and we fear nothing is happening. Our lives do matter, more than we realise. When we seek to live faithfully for God we make a contribution in our own small way to God's eternal purpose. Don't underestimate what God is doing in you and through you, even now in the ordinary events of your life.