

## Bible Month 2020 – Ruth: a story of lives interconnected

Hymn suggestions from *Singing the Faith* to accompany Rachel Starr's introduction to the book of Ruth.

1. Who is my neighbour?
2. Those unlike us
3. Reconciliation and diversity
4. Bread and belonging
5. Resilience and redemption

### 1. Who is my neighbour?

Rachel Starr writes that Ruth's story "**dramatizes the command to love the stranger**" as stated in the book of Deuteronomy: "You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." ([Deuteronomy 10: 19](#)) The story explores the overarching question that was also posed to Jesus: "And who is my neighbour?" To which Jesus responds with his parable of the Good Samaritan ([Luke 10: 25-37](#)).

[Let love be real, in giving and receiving](#)

(Michael Forster, StF 615)

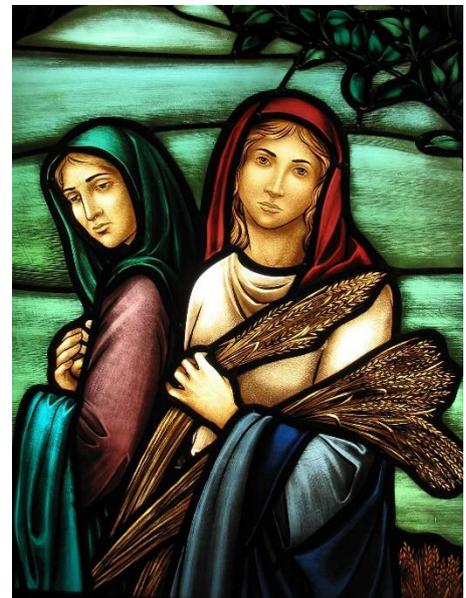
[Thou God of truth and love](#) (Charles Wesley, StF 620)

[When I needed a neighbour, were you there?](#)

(Sydney Carter, StF 256)

["Who is my neighbour", asked the Scribe](#)

(John M. Smith, StF+ website only)



Ruth's story offers new models of relationship, says Rachel. The story "**provokes new insights into what it means to live out faith in the God whose generosity generates yet more life and love**". This is seen in the companionship, uneasy at first, between Ruth and Naomi, and the relationship of mutual respect that appears to emerge between Ruth and Boaz.

[All praise to our redeeming Lord](#) (Charles Wesley, StF 608), "who joins us by his grace. . . he bids us build each other up"

[Brother, sister, let me serve you](#) (Richard Gillard, StF 611), which speaks of pilgrims on the journey, and companions on the road

[Come with me, come wander](#) (John Bell and Graham Maule, StF 462)

[God to enfold you](#) (John Bell, StF 648)

[Shalom chaverim](#) (Shalom, my friends) (Hebrew blessing, StF 414)

## 2. Those unlike us

More specifically, the story unpacks perceptions around Ruth's foreignness, and the cultural-religious belief that the Moabites were "an unclean people".

**"[The story] enters into the debate around the identity of the people of Israel, specifically how tightly ethnic boundaries should be guarded."**

Rachel Starr draws out Naomi's implied understanding that neither Ruth nor Orpah would be considered suitable marriage material back in Bethlehem. Yet Ruth becomes the ancestor of King David, and appears in the genealogy of Jesus.

[The love of God comes close where stands an open door](#) (John Bell and Graham Maule, StF 654)

Using New Testament examples, Dominic Grant urges us to [Pay heed to the people you meet on the journey](#) (StF+ website only). He also explores more widely the idea that God meets us "when we least expect" in [O Watcher in the wilderness](#) (StF 667).

Andrew Pratt has addressed these issues of otherness head on in relation to refugees and asylum seekers:

[There are no strangers to God's love](#) (Andrew Pratt, StF 716)

[If we claim to love our neighbour](#) (Andrew Pratt, StF+ website only)

With some care, it will also be worth re-reading Fred Pratt Green's hymn, [It is God who holds the nations in the hollow of his hand](#) (StF 705). Written for the Queen's Silver Jubilee, there are strong reminders here of the need to place national attitudes into a broader context. (Consider singing omitting v.3.)

## 3. Reconciliation and diversity

Rachel Starr notes that in the story of Ruth, **"personal reconciliations lead to wider restoration. Importantly, differences are not fully erased. . . In a time of division, Ruth offers us the hope of repair."**

Gary Hopkins includes in his hymn [When our views are varied](#) (StF+ website only) this prayer:

show us how to listen  
and to not accuse,  
open and respectful  
to each other's views

Also see Stephanie Jenner's hymn celebrating diversity: [We come today to celebrate](#) (StF+ website only).



Thinking about being “open and respectful / to each other’s views”, it is also worth noting that Rachel Starr gives more space than is usually the case to Orpah – the sister-in-law who is persuaded by Naomi to return to her own Moabite people. **“Like Ruth, she is loyal; the only difference is that Orpah keeps faith with her mother’s house, rather than with that of her mother-in-law. Orpah refuses to give up her identity and traditions, and her hesed [“loving kindness”] to her people should also be praised.”**

This begins to raise questions of how Christians relate to those of other faiths.

[No other name?](#) (“To help a fallen world”) (Harold Stutely, StF+ website only)

[There’s a wideness in God’s mercy](#) (Frederick Faber, StF 410)

#### 4. Bread and belonging

**“[The book of Ruth] explores the human need for bread and belonging. It makes visible the lengths to which individuals will go to ensure the survival of themselves and their loved ones. And it suggests that, through loving kindness, God is present.”**

Ruth and Naomi face stark practical needs brought about, first, by famine, and then their refugee status. These needs are encapsulated in the decision to gather the leftovers of the grain from Boaz’s fields. Reflecting the “poor laws” laid out in the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, justice issues, human wellbeing, and the grace of God all work together.

These are themes usefully pointed up in some of our communion hymns. For example:

[Bread of life, hope of the world](#) (Bernadette Farrell, StF 577), with its language of being gathered together as scattered grain is drawn together in bread. Compare this with Brian Wren’s description of “the new community of love / in Christ’s communion bread” ([I come with joy, a child of God](#), StF 588)

Perhaps explore [Food to pilgrims given](#) (Geon-yong Lee, StF 584), which uses the Lord’s Prayer (“let your kingdom come”) as a way of speaking of divine grace.

Also consider (though not in *Singing the Faith*), Marty Haugen’s “Here in this place” (“Gather us in”), with its Eucharistic third verse and its vision of “our fears and our dreamings, brought here to you in the light of this day”. And a lovely hymn by the Roman Catholic Omer Westendorf, “Finest wheat”, with its refrain:

You satisfy the hungry heart  
with gift of finest wheat:

come give to us, our saving Lord,  
the bread of life to eat.

## 5. Resilience and redemption

**“Themes of repair, resilience and resistance suggest that Ruth is a story of redemption.”**

Rachel Starr likens Ruth’s determination to that of the persistent widow in one of Jesus’ parables ([Luke 18: 1-8](#)).

[Best of all is God is with us](#) (Andrew Pratt, StF 610)  
[Holy breath of God](#) (Johnny Markin, StF 380),  
whose evocation of the Holy Spirit echoes the redemption sought by Ruth through her night-time encounter with Boaz, with its suggestions of God’s embracing presence

[One more step along the world I go](#) (Sydney Carter, StF 676)

[May the God of hope go with us every day](#) (Spanish trad., StF 411)

[You give rest to the weary](#) (Nathan and Lou Fellingham, StF 657)

Related to this is an undercurrent within the story of sexual exploitation and abuse of women, threatened or carried out. This is suggested in part by allusion to the story of Tamar ([Genesis 38](#)) and also by the hint that Orpah and Ruth were first abducted by Naomi’s sons, then claimed as wives. These troubling elements of the story (together with the redemption found eventually with Boaz) are also addressed in hymns by Shirley Erena Murray and Ruth Duck:

[God weeps at love withheld](#) (Shirley Erena Murray, StF 700)

[Pray for a world every child finds welcome](#) (Ruth Duck, StF 527)

[Sacred the body God as created](#) (Ruth Duck, StF 618) – especially v.3:

Love respects persons, bodies and boundaries.

Love does not batter, neglect or abuse.

Love touches gently, never coercing.

Love leaves the other with power to choose.

