

On your marks

The book of Ruth is a story from the time when Judges ruled in Israel. Naomi and her family had emigrated to the country of Moab because of a famine. During their ten years away, her husband and her two sons had died. The two boys had married local Moabite women. Naomi decided to return to her old home in Bethlehem and of the two daughters-in-law only Ruth eventually agrees to go with her. They arrive in Bethlehem while the barley is being harvested. To support them both, Ruth works in the fields where she meets and later marries a distant relative of her late husband, a wealthy landowner Boaz. Their great-grandson is the famous King David of Jerusalem

Get set

You can read this refugee love story in the Old Testament book of Ruth, which has only four chapters. A key verse and turning point of the story comes when Ruth, a widow herself, decides to stick with her widowed mother-in-law and leave her own country to become an outsider - an asylum seeker - in Israel:

Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay; your people shall be my people and your God my God. Ruth1:16

Go!

1. This love story has a range of emotions. Rehearse some of the following with your group and then invite them to interpret the story as you retell it. They should try and show the depth of the emotions both with their facial expressions as well as with their whole body, as the story develops. Here are some of the feelings and moods involved in the order in which they appear:

- Fear of starvation
- Sadness at leaving home
- Grief at losing loved ones
- Uncertainty of what to do next
- Amazement (that Ruth decides to go with her mother-in-law)
- Loneliness of arriving in Bethlehem
- Nervousness of being out alone in the fields
- Curiosity (of Boaz and others) on hearing about the kindnesses of Ruth
- Excitement (of Naomi) hearing about Boaz
- Relief and joy at the news of a marriage proposal
- Celebration on the wedding day

Invite the group to step into the whole story this way and provide an emotional accompaniment to your storytelling.

2. Here are some questions about the story to get your group talking about what happened:

- Why did Naomi and her family leave Bethlehem in the first place?
 - What do we call people who decide to leave their homeland like this?
 - What other reasons are there for people to leave their homeland?
 - How do you think Naomi and family felt living away from home?
 - Why did Naomi's life become so bitter?
 - What are the different feelings expressed by Orpah and by Ruth about Naomi and her decision to return home?
 - Why do you think Ruth decides to stay with Naomi?
 - What do you think Ruth feels like on arriving in Bethlehem?
 - I wonder what some of the Bethlehemites think about them as they arrive.
 - Who do you think might feel similar emotions in today's Britain?
 - How does Ruth earn the local people's respect?
 - What was surprising about Boaz's reaction to Ruth?
 - What risks was he taking?
 - Why do you think people find it so hard to welcome the stranger and be kind to the outsider?
3. How do we spot people in genuine need? How can we recognise how they really feel and as a result be able to offer genuine help?

Naomi had once been an outsider in Moab and so maybe that was how she was able to understand how Ruth felt on arriving in Bethlehem. For Boaz it was harder. He had to try and step into the shoes of what this outsider was feeling, alone in a foreign field, to be able to respond to her with compassion.

Explore through role play what it must feel like to be:

- the one that is was left out when it comes to picking teams
- the one who is in a wheelchair while all the rest of the class are able-bodied
- the one who is often away ill through no fault of their own
- the one who can't afford to wear all the latest fashionable clothes
- the one who always seems to get things wrong and be in the way

4. Here are some more thoughts to help apply the story to everyday life today:

Who are the real outsiders today? And why do we find it so hard to relate to them?

Here is a list of possible outsiders that may occur to most children:

- the child who turns up new to your class halfway through the school year
- a new neighbour in your street
- someone visiting your area or school for the day
- a refugee from another country who is housed in your town
- an asylum-seeker that you meet through your church/club
- a child you meet who wears different clothes and speaks in a different way to what you're used to



Can the group think of others?

As a group explore what different feelings you have towards these different people.

Jesus tells his famous parable, which we know as 'the good Samaritan', to address some of these very issues. The people at the time were surprised by his choice of the hated outsider as the hero of the story. They seem to have forgotten the important role that outsiders have played in the history of the people of God. Ruth's name appears in the list of the ancestors of Jesus (see Matthew 1). Can you spot some other unlikely outsiders there? I wonder what this is saying to us about how God works out his ways on earth.