



On your marks

If you're looking for a story for harvest, why not use a harvest-time tale from the Bible as told in the book of Ruth. There are many elements of this harvest romance that you could develop in conversation with the children or as part of a talk. For example: the experience of famine; the sad experiences of Naomi as an economic migrant; the loyalty of Ruth; attitudes to strangers; care for those in need; the welcome shown by Boaz to the outsider; God's blessing on his people; the setting of Bethlehem and the connection to the family line of both King David and also of course Jesus.

Get set

What follows is a retelling of the story of the whole of the book of Ruth, which you can use with your children's group or at an all-age service. Read it through a number of times so you can as far as possible tell it without having to read every word. As a starting point, why not show a piece of corn freshly cut from the fields.

Go!

Here is a retelling of the story of the book of Ruth:

A stalk of corn... a sheaf of corn... a field of corn. Perhaps over the summer you saw corn like this ripening for harvest in the fields. And that's good news. It means there will be bread in the shops... toast on our tables... and sandwiches in our lunch box. But, imagine if the corn didn't grow, the fields remained empty and there were no sheaves or stalks of corn growing. In some parts of the world this happens and it is bad news.

That's just the way it was, hundreds of years ago in Bethlehem - a town usually well known for its bread supplies. The name Bethlehem means house of bread - but not this year. This year the house was empty. There was a famine and things were bad.

Naomi's family decided that it was so bad that the only answer was to move somewhere new. To go to another country where there was food. It's no easy decision leaving your own home. It's harder still to decide to become a refugee - that's how bad it was for them. In the nearby country of Moab there was food but sadly things did not go well for Naomi.

First her husband died - she must have thought it was a terrible mistake to have left Bethlehem after all. Then her two sons, who had married local girls, fell ill and they died too. This was a real blow for Naomi. They'd moved to save their lives, not to lose them. Why, oh why, hadn't they stayed in Bethlehem? Poor Naomi was left with her two daughters-in-law - Orpah and Ruth. Naomi was a broken woman - can you imagine her sadness?

She'd been away from Bethlehem for 10 years by now and all she had known was loss. However, back in Bethlehem things had got better, so she decided to return. Alone of course, since why should



Orpah and Ruth come? They had no reason to become foreigners in a strange land. No reason, but even so, both daughters-in-law cared deeply for Naomi.

'I'm nothing but trouble and bitterness', said Naomi. 'Why come with me? You won't really belong there and there's no guarantee I can find new husbands for you. No, stay here in your own country.' Orpah eventually agreed to stay but Ruth really cared deeply for Naomi and said, 'I'll go with you. I'll stay wherever you stay... I will follow your God... and take the risk of leaving my home country because I care for you.' Ruth showed great loyalty and compassion.

In Bethlehem it was harvest time. Both Naomi and Ruth were so poor though, they had to depend on picking up the leftovers in the fields. Naomi was too old to bend and gather corn, so Ruth did all the work. All the local people were amazed that a stranger and a foreigner like Ruth should be so kind. The owner of one field was called Boaz. He was so impressed by the story of Ruth's kindness that he invited her to join up with his servants in the harvesting. It was unexpected and unusual to show such a welcome to an outsider but Boaz was a remarkable man. Even more remarkable than Ruth realised in fact, because, when she told Naomi about it, Naomi realised that Boaz was a distant cousin of her dead husband. They were related. Maybe, just maybe, God had his hand on all this after all.

Sure enough Boaz's kindness continued and, on Naomi's advice, Ruth made a private visit to Boaz to ask for help for herself and Naomi. He was a kind man and was flattered by her attention. He agreed to help and even offered to marry Ruth, if she would have him, because he was already quite old himself. This way he would give the two ladies a new home and a new start.

First though Boaz had to do the right thing and that involved a legal ceremony, just in case any other closer relative wanted to take care of the women - that was the custom in those days. But it all worked out and by the end of harvest there was a double celebration. Not only was the corn safely gathered in, but there was also a great wedding feast. It really was a surprise harvest for Ruth and for her mother-in-law.

Ruth's kindness and compassion had not gone unnoticed or un-rewarded, neither by Naomi, nor by Boaz, nor by God. And that's not quite the end of the story, because Ruth had a little harvest of own! Soon a son was born; and that son had a son and that son had more sons and daughters. A whole 'field of corn' grew up from Ruth's family and indeed one of those great grandson's turned out be none other than the great King David himself. And even that isn't the end of the story because one of David's distant, distant, distant great-great-great... grandchildren turned out to be the most compassionate person that ever lived. Can you guess who that was? How surprised Ruth would have been by this harvest!