

25. August 2023

## The love of Ruth

Ruth 1:1,3-6,14b-16,22

*In the days of one of the judges, when the judges ruled, there came a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem Juda, went to sojourn in the land of Moab with his wife and his two sons. And Elimelech the husband of Noemi died: and she remained with her sons. And they took wives of the women of Moab, of which one was called Orpha, and the other Ruth. And they dwelt there ten years. And they both died, to wit, Mahalon and Chelion: and the woman was left alone, having lost both her sons and her husband. And she arose to go from the land of Moab to her own country with both her daughters in law: for she had heard that the Lord had looked upon his people, and had given them food. Orpha kissed her mother in law and returned: Ruth stuck close to her mother in law. And Noemi said to her: Behold thy kinswoman is returned to her people, and to her gods, go thou with her. She answered: Be not against me, to desire that I should leave thee and depart: for whithersoever thou shalt go, I will go: and where thou shalt dwell, I also will dwell. Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God. Noemi came with Ruth the Moabites her daughter in law, from the land of her sojournment: and returned into Bethlehem, in the beginning of the barley harvest.*

The beautiful words that Ruth utters, allow us to take a deep look into her heart: *"Whithersoever thou shalt go, I will go: and where thou shalt dwell, I also will dwell. Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God."* The full biblical text also adds these words of hers, *"The land that shall receive thee dying, in the same will I die: and there will I be buried."*

It is a language of love and self-giving, which could hardly be surpassed. In her words one can feel the profound awakening of love and of the capacity for self-giving of one person to another. This mystery of love reaches its fullness in the relationship between God and the human soul, and in the surrender of the Church to her divine Bridegroom (cf. Eph 5:21-32). We can also discover this unconditional self-giving in the apostles of Jesus, for example in Peter, who wants to give his life for the Lord (cf. Jn 13:37).

In this free act of love, which makes us capable of giving ourselves completely, without being forced and without being "obliged" by circumstances, we can understand that the following of Christ, at its deepest core, consists in an act of love.

This reality is described in the first of the commandments: "*Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, and with thy whole soul, and with thy whole strength*" (Dt 6:5). Surrender to the Person of God, who possesses in Himself the fullness of being and has no limit, is deeply inscribed in our heart. It is only when we wholeheartedly and freely perform this act of love and live it concretely that we will discover our true identity.

In the case of Ruth, there is also the fact that, through her love and faithfulness to Naomi, she was able to recognise the true God. In fact, sometimes God uses the beauty of human love so that, through that love, a person can find the way to Him.

Understanding that following Christ is, at its deepest level, an act of love, will free us from many pressures. Our faith is not, in the first instance, a set of obligations and rules that we have to fulfil, but a response to God's love and surrender to Him. Of course, obligations are not abolished, but the more we are permeated by love, the more the spirit in which we fulfil them will change. Then it is not our own efforts and merits that are the focus, but love has its eyes fixed on the One to whom it wants to give itself.

The same is true for the proper exercise of authority. True authority is founded on love, which in turn has truth as its foundation. This is also the way in which spiritual shepherds are to shepherd their flock. In fact, it is precisely this that distinguishes them from those other shepherds who want to replace the true authority of love and truth with their apparent strength, thus becoming authoritarian.

In Ruth we can see a love so great that it made her capable of setting out with Naomi into a totally unknown reality. The same is true of surrender to the Lord. If our love for Him becomes great, we no longer need to know what the future holds, nor do we have to "take precautions". We live in the security of His love, just as Ruth felt secure in the love of her mother-in-law and could therefore also testify to her own love.