

November 17, 2002  
First Sunday of Advent

### Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Very important to the Gospel of Matthew is the theme of the calling of the nations into the Church. "Make disciples of all the nations (ethne, goyim)," Jesus commands the eleven apostles at the end of that gospel (28:19), and Matthew, alone among the four evangelists, quotes the prophecy of Isaiah to the effect that Jesus "will declare justice to the Gentiles" and "in His name Gentiles will trust" (12:18,21). Early in his story Matthew gives us, moreover, a first fruits of that call of the nations in the story of the distant Magi who came to worship the Christ Child (2:1-2).

Even earlier, however, Matthew faintly intimates this universal call in the genealogy with which he begins his Gospel. Students of the Bible have long remarked that three of the four of the women named in that genealogy are Gentiles: the Canaanites Tamar and Rehab, and the Moabite Ruth. All three of these women are the subjects of very interesting stories in the Old Testament.

Among these three, nonetheless, the Old Testament takes a singular care to tie Ruth most closely to the genealogy of David (Ruth 4:13-22), and it is on Jesus' relationship to David that Matthew commences his entire account: "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David" (Matthew 1:1). Let us speak, then, of Ruth, the great-grandmother of David and distant ancestor to the Son of God.

We may begin by reflecting on the sheer improbability of the thing. Generally speaking, after all, the Moabites seem not to have been among the Bible's favorite folks. When Zephaniah predicted that "Moab shall be like Sodom" (Zephaniah 2:9), the news hardly came as a shock to anybody. Pronouncements such as "I will send a fire upon Moab" and "Moab will die with tumult" (Amos 2:2) pretty much sum up the prevailing biblical sentiment on Ruth's fellow countrymen. Moses had, in fact, made that sentiment a national policy: "An Ammonite or a Moabite shall not enter the assembly of the Lord; even to the tenth generation none of his descendents shall enter the assembly of the Lord forever" (Deuteronomy 23:3). Such was the un-nuanced "official line" of the Old Testament on the subject of the Moabites.

Such was the context in which the young Moabite widow Ruth said to her widowed Israelite mother-in-law Naomi, "Wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried" (Ruth 1:16-17). Ruth was biting off a great deal by accompanying Naomi back to Bethlehem. Indeed, her faith is properly likened to that of Abraham, who also left his family and his father's house in order to follow God's summons to a strange land.

And with due respect to the immortal John Keats (who needed a word to rhyme with "forlorn"), there is scant evidence that Ruth, after she arrived in Bethlehem, "stood in tears amid the alien corn." There was no time for that sort of thing. Ruth was far too busy, bent over all day long in the fields of Boaz, gleaning one-by-one the fallen grains of barley and wheat.

The townspeople at Bethlehem, much impressed that Ruth remained so deeply devoted to her mother-in-law, adopted a lenient view of the injunction about avoiding Moabites. "It is the young Moabite woman," they said to one another, "who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab" (Ruth 2:6). Though she regarded herself as a foreigner at first (2:10), the rumor of her loyalty had gotten around: "It has been fully reported to me all that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband, and how you have left your father and mother and the land of your birth, and have come to a people whom you did not know before. The Lord reward your work, and a full reward be given you by the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge" (2:11-12).

It is one of the great ironies of this highly ironical book that the man who spoke those lines became the instrument by which God rewarded Ruth for what she had done. Boaz answered his own prayer, as it were, and Ruth in due course became his wife. Centuries later, Matthew felt it appropriate to mention this young woman who caused Moabite blood to be included in the great price poured out on the Cross.

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