*In the days when Judges ruled…..*

Well, was that a golden era?

The Book of Judges in the Old Testament gives us some great stories about the emergence of Israelite religion and identity, with names such as Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, Samson and Delilah that might be familiar to us, though many would be hard pressed to narrate the Bible story in which they feature.

The Book of Ruth, like Judges, gives us a vivid impression of the complex cultural influences that shape the history of Israel, and the sense of being God’s chosen race.

The story of Ruth might have been an ancient text not included in the Holy Scriptures until late in Israel’s history, perhaps after the disastrous destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in the late 5th century before the Christian Era, and a period of exile in Babylon, modern day Iraq.

And there could be several reasons why the author of Ruth wrote this haunting story. I would like to suggest two reasons why she, or he, might have done so, and draw from them a lesson for our own time.

The first reason is that this is a moving story about courage, loyalty and endurance in the face of overwhelming adversity. It is far from being unusual in presenting women as the exemplars of virtue that they draw from faith in God. Others would be Sara, Rebecca, Rachel, Miriam, Hannah, Judith, Esther, and the unnamed little slave-girl in the household of Naaman the Syrian.

These women are familiar with love and grief. They suffer humiliation and they know the fragility of giving birth, the astonishing gift of a child, its survival against the odds, and the terror of disease for which there seems to be no cure. And in their experience of being women, wives and mothers, they attribute to God the gift of life as something that invites reverence for the potential that God makes possible in the life of every person, in spite of our human expectations.

In the Terminally Ill (End of Life) Bill that is currently going through Parliament, it has often been women who have reminded us of the insidious pressures that can lead to a dangerous calculation of the financial cost of a life under the categories of age, mental capacity, the cost of care or value to society. These women, and the men who stand with them, call upon society to expend whatever it costs to provide a level of care – social, psychiatric, educational, palliative care – that is commensurate with the miracle and dignity of life and the compassion that is rightly demanded of us as a virtuous and responsible society in the face of any human suffering.

I join with these women to say to the guardians and practitioners of the Law that since the end of capital punishment, we believe that causing the death of another citizen is not allowed in our law, other than in war, and we believe that we shall inflict grave moral damage to our society, especially as a threat to the most vulnerable among us, if we permit the End of Life Bill to breach the protection that the law presently ensures.

A second reason for writing down the story of Ruth is to reminds us that even in the history of Israel, God includes in his chosen people those who seem not to qualify by birth. So it is of great significance that Ruth the Moabite woman, has a place in the ancestry of King David and, consequently, she stands in a particular relationship to Jesus of Nazareth who, as we know from Christmas carols and readings, was born in Bethlehem because he was of David’s house and line.

The trauma of exile in Babylon that might be the context in which the book of Ruth came to prominence, reflects the experience of migration that is taking place today on an unprecedented scale. Hopes for a peaceful settlement in Gaza and Ukraine hinge on external agency. Similarly in the Biblical history of Israel, it is the external agency of Cyrus, the King of Persia, who issues an edict for the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem, a massive symbol of identity and peace for the Jewish exiles. The prophet Isaiah refers to Cyrus as an agent of God, and in due course the prophet Zachariah envisages Jerusalem as a symbolic city in which ‘the vine shall give her fruit, the ground shall give her increase, and the heavens shall give their dew’ (8:12), a sacred place where many people will come to seek the Lord of Hosts and pray before the Lord (8:22).

So this slender book of the Holy Scriptures, beautifully crafted in its presentation of Ruth, a victim of the vicissitudes of history but an abiding example of virtue, offers a potent challenge to those who shamefully weaponize the Holy Scriptures and the Christian faith in order to denigrate people of other faiths.

While Christianity is by no means a universalist religion that could accommodate any obscuring of the unique revelation of God in Jesus Christ, we cannot allow popularist misrepresentation of the Holy Scriptures or misuse of the symbol of the cross of Jesus Christ to promote racism, hatred and violence which, we must admit, shamefully scar our history. We repent of those sins in our past and we will call them out and name them as sinful today.

In the reading from the Acts of the Apostles, Jesus leaves the disciples and ascends to his Father, to the heavenly Jerusalem. The disciples cannot follow him: they have to learn how to shape in the earthly city the life of the kingdom of God, founded on the law of love and the virtues of justice and peace.

Luke, the author of the Acts, tells us that the distance to where they had to begin to build was a sabbath day’s journey. And on a sabbath day travel is not for work: travel is for social joy, for building harmony, for exploring the mystery of God and for discovering dignity in the worship of God.

May we, as a nation, learn to travel well together and so find our destiny and our delight in God.