

November 24, 2002
Second Sunday of Advent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

In *Far From the Madding Crowd* Thomas Hardy portrays a steady, dependable, hard-working man, on whom he confers the name Gabriel Oak. He is a strong, independent character, deeply rooted in the land and its labor, and his wonderfully virile name, suggesting the feel of sinewed firmness, conveys a great deal of who he is. Indeed, one can hardly imagine a name more manly than Gabriel. Derived from the Semitic root *gbr*, signifying "man" or "strength," and *El*, the biblical word for "God," Gabriel means either "man of God" or "strength of God." As for "Oak," of course, the very sound evokes that mightiest, most stable of ancient trees, *Quercus robur*, the "hard wood" of Cicero and Vergil. Surely, any man alive might envy Gabriel Oak his sturdy name.

When I think of Gabriel Oak, a deeper memory invariably summons to my mind another steady man of strength, who went by the name of Boaz. Like Hardy's character, Boaz too lived far from the madding crowd, hard-working on his land, and his name was likewise significant. Also Semitic, Boaz (*bo Coz*) means "in him is strength."

A further similarity between the two men is that both of them married young widows. Aside from that curious particular, it must be said, there is scant similarity between Boaz's Ruth and Gabriel's Bathsheba Everdeen, and I confess that former gentleman seems to me by far the more fortunate in his choice. How Boaz came to make that choice involves the plot of some of the most charming pages in the Bible.

Boaz lived in Bethlehem, "the house of bread," and made his very substantial living by growing barley and wheat. (Indeed, the story's emphasis on Boaz's abundant grain harvests stands in stark contrast to the famine or "hunger," *ra'av*, with which the Book of Ruth begins.) Maintaining a residence in the town, Boaz went out daily to oversee the workers in his fields. He also labored with them and was known sometimes to sleep out on the threshing floors during the winnowing days.

The Bible describes Boaz as a kind and godly man, and both traits were picked up by his field laborers. "The Lord be with you," he greeted them each morning, to which they responded,

"The Lord bless you!" (2:4) Blessing, indeed, rose easily to the lips of Boaz (2:12;3:10). He likewise took good care of his workers, making certain that they had water to drink under the hot sun (2:9) and seasoned food when they broke for the midday meal (2:14).

Himself a kind and godly man, it is not surprising that Boaz appreciated kindness and godliness in others, and such were exactly the traits that he admired in Ruth, the woman who had accompanied the unfortunate Naomi back from her recent, sad sojourn in Moab. Arriving at work one morning, Boaz found the young Moabite woman gleaning the fallen heads of grain dropped by his reapers, a privilege that the Mosaic Law reserved for the poor. Boaz treated Ruth with his accustomed kindness, further enhanced by knowing of her own kindness to Naomi. He encouraged Ruth to remain in his own fields, instead of wandering elsewhere (2:21-22), and instructed his reapers to leave extra grain lying in her path to be gleaned (2:16). In short, he "took notice" of her (2:19)

We do not know at what point Boaz's admiration for Ruth assumed an amorous tone, but it did so before the summer was over. Aware of being a kinsman to her deceased husband, Boaz was alert to the possibility of marrying Ruth by levirate law. Indeed, he must have researched the question, because he learned that there was another male relative, whose claims in the matter were stronger than his own. Because Boaz was older than Ruth (3:10), perhaps he felt embarrassed to present himself as a possible husband.

Then, one night as he slept on the grain at the threshing floor, the suddenly chilled Boaz was awakened to find the perfumed presence of a woman lying at his feet. It was Ruth, asking him to marry her (3:9). He needed no further coaxing. As the two of them lay there the rest of that night, Boaz devised a plan to advance his claim over his possible rival.

After discretely sending Ruth home in the final hour before daylight, Boaz arranged a meeting at which he employed a clever stratagem that outwitted his rival (4:1-10). Thus, Boaz became the husband of Ruth, at the end of one of the very few truly romantic stories in the Bible.

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