

Thought for the Day by Pádraig Ó Tuama
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Kindness, Borders and Ruth

In 2021, we will mark the centenary of the border in Ireland. That 300 mile frontier that separates 6 counties from 26 counties. It was established in 1921 and, even then, was loved by some and loathed by others.

How will the border's centenary be marked?

We don't know yet. Some see it as a celebration. Others see it as a lamentation.

I work in the area of peace and reconciliation and as we've been preparing for this upcoming anniversary, we've been wondering what story is adequate enough to help us address this complicated centenary. People here disagree about where the UK ends and where Ireland begins, so historical stories from our *own* islands are going to be as divisive as they've always been.

And that won't help. Because in order to mark a border — and to mark the griefs and conflicts of our border — we need a story that will hold us, not divide us, whatever the state of the border.

So we've turned to a story much older than Irish stories or British stories.

We've turned to a story from the book of Ruth, in the Hebrew Bible.

The story of Ruth is the story of a foreign widow.

Newly arrived in a strange country, she wondered — how will I live here? Will I access the provisions for a widow here? How will my nationality be viewed here?

In the four short chapters of this dramatic Biblical book, you read about the courage of this foreign woman Ruth; and how, crossing political, gender and linguistic borders, she practices courage, and brings kindness out in others.

In Ruth's remarkable story, *kindness* becomes a political word: a word to be used in the decisions about economics and immigration. This is a story for our times.

In a time where borders and belonging are being discussed it is interesting to consider what the serious practice of kindness in politically divided times might look like.

In the last year, my colleagues and I have met with 3000 people to talk about Ruth. People who've been bereaved through the troubles; people who practice courage and kindness everyday.

The serious practice of kindness is neither saccharine nor sweet.

It is exhausting.

It demands negotiation, compromise, confrontation, the declaration of hurt and the determination to find a way forward that hurts the fewest people. It requires the practice of hospitality in times of hostility.

Kindness costs.

Kindness doesn't cover over the past, it does, however, propose something for now that might make the future different.

As we navigate borders and belonging in the UK and Ireland, we know that policy *alone* won't save us. Policy is never the final word. Whatever our borders, we will always need courage.. And kindness.