

Readings

Ruth 1: 1-18

Mark 12: 28-34

Sermon

Love can be a very soppy word that is easily relegated to romance novels and fairy stories rather than the hard reality of a world of war, pandemics, and gross national products. Furthermore, this morning's reading from the book of Ruth is often read with a saccharine coating of 'happy ever after' without any regard for the plight of women in a patriarchal society.

Yet somewhere behind that cynicism I can hear John Lennon's words:

'Love, Love is all you need'

Along with an echo from the book of Micah

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;

and what does the Lord require of you

but to do justice, and to love kindness,

and to walk humbly with your God?

(Micah 6:8)

In fact, our Gospel reading focuses on the very essence of what it means to be a follower of Christ. To love God and love others. More specifically and much more challenging we could suggest, that as Christians, we are called to love God by loving others.

Not just some others but all others.

Perceptive as ever Bill Loader notes that these two commandments are at the heart of the Gospel. Loving God and loving neighbour is the central theology that Christians need to be encouraged to own. Yet it is the fundamental theology that most fundamentalism denies.¹

However, these two commandments, endorsed both by Jesus and the scribe who questioned him, rapidly slip down the list of priorities wherever claims to absolute authority of the Bible, the Church, doctrine, ritual or order appear to need protection.

Thinking back over the years I have attended the Presbyterian general assembly I can remember being enthralled and inspired as our concern for others drove us to some fierce debates over human rights.

Always cautious and conservative in the stewardship of our resources we nevertheless demanded that an insurance company we had investments with must withdraw from apartheid South Africa. Like so much of the wider community we also tore ourselves apart over sporting contacts with that same nation.

¹<http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/BEpPentecost23.html>

Our efforts were recognised by the new South Africa when one of our ministers, and indeed a former minister of this parish, the Very Rev John Murray was invited as an official observer of the first multi-racial elections that formed the new South Africa.

I will never forget John telling a small group that what happened in South Africa was a miracle. He then gave his definition of a miracle and I still hold that definition in my heart.

A Miracle is when you think something should happen, you pray that it will happen, you work to make it happen, but you really know it won't happen.

Then it happens! That's a miracle.

Many Christians worked and prayed for that miracle and a couple of New Zealanders are worth mentioning. In the course of my spare time political activities I was privileged to meet John Osmer, the first Anglican Bishop of Eastern Zambia. He worked so hard for change in South Africa that the apartheid secret service sent him a letter bomb and blew his hand off.

Previously my cousin had given me Father Michael Lapsley's book, and he suffered the same fate. He then went on to run reconciliation workshops.

You may have read John Osmer's obituary in The Press recently. He returned to Zambia to raise some concerns with the President and caught Covid 19 with a fatal result.

It is people like that and congregations like Knox that keep me, even in retirement, part of the Presbyterian Church as I keep praying for a return to the caring inclusive church that nurtured me for so long.

From my perspective we have shifted as a church from unconditional love for others to having legislation about which people can love each other. That seems very strange indeed when today's Gospel reading focuses on love rather than legislation as the very essence of Christianity.

Furthermore, the opening chapter of Ruth focuses on the love of two women for each other. So, if we are called to behave in particular ways because 'the Bible says so' then the story of Ruth and Naomi seem to Affirm that perhaps God isn't a Presbyterian after all.

Putting such facetious comments aside it is worth noting that in my thirty years as a photographer I probably attended about twenty wedding a year and this morning's reading from the book of Ruth would be the most popular wedding bible reading. That used to intrigue me because it is, as I have just mentioned a story about unconditional love between two women and therefore has nothing to do heterosexual marriage. It does however have a lot to say about the place of women in patriarchal societies and the power of love to make women safe in such a world.

Certainly, love is a major theme in this part of Ruth's story and is a vital part of any relationship. Like all good stories however when you read the whole book you will find the story has cunning plans, trickery, and power plays.

Without doubt the tribal and patriarchal world of Ruth and Naomi contributed to the commitment of the two women and there are elements of desperation that in some ways make the relationship inevitable. In later chapters the reader gets to understand that women

had difficulty in surviving without men in the world of Ruth and Naomi. But their chances of doing so were greatly enhanced by working together.

We should also note Naomi's loving concern in suggesting the women go back to their families. Internet dating hadn't been invented and the best chance for the women was for their families to arrange new marriages for them. That was a sacrifice on Naomi's part because it made her more vulnerable, and it showed her love for both her daughters in law.

Arranged marriages may seem strange to most of us but they do happen in our communities. A photographer friend of mine who is New Zealand born told me he was shown three photographs of women living in Hong Kong and told to pick one for his wife. Very recently I met an Indian woman who was sent to New Zealand to marry a man she had never met. She now has a family and a PhD and is very much part of the Christchurch community.

Kiwis of European decent might not arrange marriages for their children in the same way but they do send them to schools where they will meet the right kind of people.

So, although this is an ancient story about a completely different world to our own there are similarities. What is true for this ancient world and for our world is that it is love that binds people together and that is not unique to any particular time or culture.

The biological facts are that we are a communal species and our need for each other to survive reaches beyond the basic need to reproduce.

When my youngest cousin Geoffrey was at varsity he formed a relationship with a woman who was older than him and had a young family. At his funeral she told me that she eventually broke off with him because she realised that he wanted a wife and family and she did not want more children. I suspect her divorce had left scars but significantly her loving regard for Geoffrey meant that she wanted him to have the opportunity to have a family. Love however is not something that we can easily organise, and Geoffrey never married. However, his widowed mother became best buddies with his ex-girlfriend and that friendship lasted for the rest of my aunt's life. They were two women without men who looked out for each other, shared overseas trips with each other, and were always part of family gatherings.

The relationship between my aunt and my cousin's ex-girlfriend strengthened the relationships between my aunt's family and all those connected to her children in some way. Often when Raewyn and I are in Auckland we get invited to my cousins' family gatherings. Those gatherings consist of people that are connected to each other by various past relationships including ex partners and their new wives. Connections that stretch across the globe.

At wedding services I usually say that marriage provides a relationship which society recognises, and a relationship that strengthens and enriches society. I also said that at a civil union between two men that I conducted.

The vision in our Gospel reading is that love can extend relationships beyond our DNA to include the family of all humanity.

It is now popular to check out our ancestry by sending a sample of our DNA to some organisation or other. There are also television programmes where celebrities are sent

around the world following up obscure links in their chain of ancestry. Such programs have not only demonstrated the diversity of our ethnic and cultural backgrounds but highlight our desire to be connected to other people. We like to be, and perhaps need to be, part of a family beyond our immediate relationships, and recognise our connections with people we have never met before.

The full text that Jesus quotes from Leviticus states 'You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD.' (Leviticus 19:18)

That clearly focuses on family and tribe and gives plenty of scope for revenge and genocide against the Canaanites or anybody else that could be considered not 'Your own people.' However, although the two texts Jesus quotes in today's reading from Mark's Gospel don't necessarily prohibit vengeance on those we might not consider to be neighbours, the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke's Gospel very definitely does. The story of the Good Samaritan instructs us that, regardless of any sporting contest, we even have to love Australians as ourselves.

If we are serious about following Jesus we have to build our image of Christ from all the Gospels.

Furthermore, our contemporary fascination with DNA and family trees demonstrates that the further we look back at our ancestry the more we discover just how many diverse people are in fact 'our people.'

That is true because we are not just a communal species, we are a migratory species and our history is filled with captive slaves, shipwrecks, wilderness journeys in search of new beginnings, and journeys of conquest. As well as historians and anthropologists, myths, stories and even crime novels inform us of this spread of human DNA.

The detective in Ann Cleeves' Shetland Series has a darker complexion compared with most people from the Fair Isle. It is assumed his ancestor swam ashore from the vanquished Spanish Armada. Furthermore, one novel describes an annual festival of Viking origin.

History is also filled with wave upon wave of refugees from war and domination along with those escaping from economic ineptitude and climate change.

No more so than in places like New Zealand where all people are an invasive species that cause immense damage to the once pristine environment. We are all people who have a genetic trail that stretches around the world connecting us to the great family of all humanity.

Our family histories cry out for the recognition that we are all 'our people' our neighbours, members of the family of all humanity who we must love as we love ourselves.

Furthermore, as Mark has Jesus link the two quotations from Deuteronomy and Leviticus we learn that the way we love God is by loving others as we love ourselves.

As wave upon wave of mutated viruses threatens the lives of the world's most powerful and most vulnerable people Jesus' conversation with the scribe not only offers hope but also underlines the truth in John Lennon's words:

'Love, Love is all you need'