

How do we love God and love our neighbour?

3 November 2024

BIBLE READINGS

Open our eyes, O God, to the beauty of your word.

May our lips and our lives unite to honour you.

[Ruth 1:1-18](#)

In the days when the Judges ruled in Israel, there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelek, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, in Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.

Now Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived in Moab about ten years, both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

When Naomi heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.

Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, 'Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the Lord show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.' Then she kissed them goodbye and they wept aloud and said to her, 'We will go back with you to your people.'

But Naomi said, 'Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me – even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons – would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has turned against me.'

At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her.

‘Look,’ said Naomi, ‘your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her.’

But Ruth replied, ‘Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you.

Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay.

Your people will be my people and your God my God.

Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried.

May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.’

When Naomi realised that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

[Mark 12:28-34](#)

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, ‘Of all the commandments, which is the most important?’

‘The most important one,’ answered Jesus, ‘is this:

“Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.”

The second is this: “Love your neighbour as yourself.”

There is no commandment greater than these.’

‘Well said, teacher,’ the man replied. ‘You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other. To love God with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.’

When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God.’

And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.

For the word of God in Scripture,

for the word of God among us,

for the word of God within us,

thanks be to God.

MESSAGE - How do we love God and love our neighbour?

It won't surprise you to know that one of the strongest characteristics of our modern Western culture is its focus on the individual.

Rather than being concerned for the well-being of the wider community or the cost to the environment, most of our advertising and even politics is aimed at meeting the needs and aspirations of individuals. These two have been in the news this week with questions being asked about their selfishness and greed. This strong focus on individuals is why many people disregard climate change or justice for First Nations people as serious issues ... they don't affect me directly, so I don't need to change my behavior or my priorities at all. The struggles and pain of threatened species or aboriginal people don't affect my enjoyment of life ... so why think or worry about them?



But as you know, the Scriptures tell a very different story. God may indeed work through individuals but the focus usually falls on community and how we are to live in peace with one another and seek justice in the world.

There is a strong and consistent focus on caring for the most needy – whether they are widows, orphans, the hungry, the sick or the refugee.

In the Jewish Scriptures, our Old Testament, the Law of Moses takes pride of place. This written Law contains hundreds of



commandments covering everything from worship to household and farming practices, from food and money to disease control and relationships between neighbours. Hence for an expert in the Jewish Law trying to trap Jesus, a clever question to ask is: Rabbi, among these hundreds of laws, what is the first or most important one?

We know that Jesus gives a very conventional answer ... Jesus quotes the Shema – the prayer recited by devout Jews every morning and every evening – both then and now ... taken from Deuteronomy 6:4–5 ...

*Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one;
you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,
and with all your soul,
and with all your mind,
and with all your strength.*

In other words, the first commandment – from which everything else flows – is to love God whole-heartedly. According to Jesus, we are called to do the same.

How do we love God? ... through our worship, our prayer, our reading of the Scriptures and in how we live and treat others, who are all made in the image of God. Also in how we care for God's creation.

Everything else flows from the choice of putting God at the centre.

Jesus goes on to say that the second commandment is similar:

You shall love your neighbour as yourself

So how do I want to be treated?

With respect? Understanding? Compassion?

Then let my actions towards others reflect these same qualities.

This is such a positive way to live – which flows from God's love for us and our love for God.

Love is a slippery word of course, which means different things to different people. The sort of love Jesus was speaking about is shown in how we act – the choices we make every day in how we respond to others, and the character that shines through. This is seen so clearly in Jesus' life and how he had time and patience for everybody yet how he was especially drawn to those in need.

It's why ministries like Helping Hand and playgroup and the meals program at Croydon North matter. It's also why the way we listen to the struggles of our neighbour and how we respond in practical ways matter.

Whether it's an organised ministry or our day by day interactions, we're called to express our love for our neighbour in practical ways.

We know this teaching well, of course.

We know the path Jesus invites us to walk.

The challenge for us is to actually walk the path, today and every day.

In the words of a Ross Langmead song that we sometimes sing, we need God's help to live like this ...

- To see the beauty of a person not the colour of their skin
- To listen to my neighbour when I'd rather speak and go
- To love the loveless and fragile ... and annoying ... and selfish ...



I want to spend a few minutes reflecting on the start of the story of two remarkable women – Ruth and Naomi. Life deals Naomi a very tough hand. First, there is a famine and she and her family are forced to become economic refugees – seeking food and a better life in Moab.

While living in this new land, things improve for Naomi – her sons marry and life is more stable. But then further hardship strikes – her husband and both her sons die. When I think of Naomi's life to that point, I think of the millions of refugees in the world today – fleeing from difficult and often desperate circumstances, dealing with tragic loss, and just trying to survive day by day. How are such people welcomed today? Are they loved as neighbours in need?



Not too far from where this story of Ruth is set, I think of the war and near obliteration of Gaza, a war that has been going on since 1948. Unlike Naomi and her family, for most families trapped in Gaza there is no option of fleeing to Moab in search of food and a new start. There is nowhere

else to go and no-one willing to take these people in and offer shelter.

There are no easy solutions to the conflict, but it's hard not to think that Israel is being a very cruel neighbour to Gaza, just as a year ago Gaza was a very cruel neighbour to Israel. How things could be so different if both sides could choose to love their neighbour instead of killing without mercy.

Returning to the story of Naomi, she feels deeply bitter towards God and towards life itself, and decides to go back to Israel, alone.



She tries to persuade her two daughters-in-law to remain in Moab and to remarry. Orpah agrees and kisses her goodbye but Ruth clings to Naomi in love.

- She will stick with Naomi – whatever the cost
- She will choose to live as a refugee in a strange land
- She will even begin worshipping the God of Israel

Ruth embodies the faith, hope and love that Paul often speaks about.

Over the next couple of weeks we will hear more of the story of Naomi and Ruth and see how the hospitality, generosity and kindness of ordinary neighbours can turn life around for refugees like Ruth and even for the most bitter of people like Naomi. We'll see how love of God and love of one's neighbour can make a practical difference.