

Sermon by Rev David Thiem

Sunday 1st November 2015 – Pentecost 23 – 9am Wesley

Readings: Ruth 1:1-18 'Ruth goes with her mother-in-law'
Mark 12:28-34 'Love God and your neighbour as yourself'.

Theme: 'Devoted Love'

Introduction

This is a sermon, in two sections, with readings set almost a thousand years apart, yet still with application to our lives and society today.

Initially I'll talk a little about the Ruth passage and then turn our thoughts later in the service to Mark 12.

Ruth

For some people they simply know of the book of Ruth because of words often used in wedding services that are in the set reading for today.

"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, ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me." Ruth 1:16b-17

Oddly enough, these words do not relate to marriage at all but to the daughter-in-law, a Moabitess Ruth, who says she will stay with her Jewish mother-in-law, Naomi, even though it means leaving her own country after her husband has died.

The book of Ruth is amazing in that it is part of the Hebrew Scriptures at all. Set in a situation of grief and barrenness, this chapter introduces us to two women through whom God will tear down some long admired and carefully crafted walls. The heroine in the story is not Hebrew but from Moab. While not evident in the writings within Ruth, there was great hatred between the Moabites and the Jews. The original onslaught of the Israelite tribes against towns that were once Moabite had never been forgotten or forgiven. Moab encompassed the expansive, grain filled plateau between the Dead Sea and the eastern desert on both sides of the enormous rift of the Arnon River gorge. Much of eastern Moab was steppeland – semi-arid but with wonderful grazing land for flocks of sheep and goats.

It is with this background of animosity between the nations in the past and the thought of foreign wives being repulsive to 'true' Jews, that we have this account of amazing love and devotion in a time of harsh criticism and bloody attacks in the time of the judges, roughly 850 years before Christ, although an actual date still has scholars debating.

At different stages of their lives, both Naomi and Ruth were foreigners, refugees in a different land, for a variety of reasons.

Both were widowed and had no male to care for them in a foreign land which made them vulnerable and powerless. Both were on the fringe of society and had little social status.

The book of Ruth speaks into these social questions of refugees, mixed marriages, religious boundaries, racism and offers new hope and new life. Not a story or a book

that you would imagine as being in the Hebrew Scriptures. A book for Jews and Christians to re-read today and allow God to be at work instead of limiting God. The story ends with Ruth remarrying a Jew, Boaz, and giving birth to a son Obed, who was the father of Jesse, who was the father of David. This was the lineage through which Jesus came and it was not 'pure Hebrew' – fascinating for us to reflect on that.

Mark 12: 28-34 "The greatest commandment"

As we come to today's gospel it is set in a question and answer type scenario and this section is the third of those questions and answers. Earlier there is the question on paying taxes, then marriage and resurrection and here Jesus is asked:

"Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

We need to note that Jewish rabbis counted 613 commandments in the law, and attempted to differentiate between 'heavy' (or great ones) and 'light' (or little ones). Jesus' response was not anything radical or new but was simply a summary of 'loving God' as per Deuteronomy 6:5 first and that flows into 'loving one's neighbour as yourself' which comes from Leviticus 19:18.

It is also a summary of the Ten Commandments in which the first 5 talk about loving God and the last five as loving your neighbour.

Traditionally for the Jew, your neighbour is your fellow Jew. But Jesus has already taught the parable of the Good Samaritan, which is in line with the teaching found in the Book of Ruth. Your neighbour may well be beyond your fellow Jew and you need to be open to this and not narrow by country, kin or even by faith.

John Wesley made the point about neighbour beautifully in this old quote which I have slightly modernised:

'Thy neighbour' – that is, not only your friend, your kinsman, or your acquaintance; not only the virtuous, the friendly, those who love you or return kindness; but every human creature, every soul which God has made; not excepting those whom you have never seen...; not excepting those who you know to be evil and unthankful, those who despitely use and abuse you and those who persecute you. These you shall love as yourself."

Suddenly loving your neighbour as yourself becomes a very confrontative issue. I had unsigned hate mail from a neighbour in my letterbox this week, wrongly directed at me for the removal of peacocks around our place and at St Aidan's. Reading this passage brought me up sharply as I was affronted both by the language and how upset this note made both Annette and myself feel and certainly I felt no love towards the writer of this appalling letter.

However, suddenly I am confronted differently by Jesus' words of 'loving your neighbour as yourself' and I need to reflect afresh on what this means to and for me especially towards my neighbours around me in Narrabundah.

God's word somehow has a way of speaking into our situations today even when they are two or three thousand years old.

May God's word continue to unsettle us. Amen.