

# A tricky question

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 3 November 2024

A Reflection by Rev Penny Jones

Pentecost 24

Ruth 1: 1-18; Mark 12: 28-34

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

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Most of those asking Jesus questions so far in Mark's gospel have been hostile – seeking in various ways to catch him out. However, as Mark records the encounter, it would seem that this scribe is different. They listen and hear that Jesus answers well and receive his response gladly, in such a way that Jesus declares them as *'not far from the kingdom of God'*.

The question is nevertheless a tricky one, and Jesus's response is careful. He limits his answer to the Torah. He begins in the most orthodox way imaginable by invoking the Shema, *"Hear, O Israel,"* from Deuteronomy 6:4–5; first, an assertion of who God is and to whom God is. And then, a command issued on the basis of that identity, to love God with all one's being — God and no other. And then, Jesus adds from Leviticus 19:18, *"You shall love your neighbour as yourself."* There is in effect nothing novel about any of this.

For our part we have heard this so often that there is a danger of it having become practically ho-hum – love God, love your neighbour; the Golden Rule, *'Mrs do -as you -would-be -done -by'*; nothing new to see here, go back to sleep?! But if that is what we hear, then I suspect we have not heard at all. For here we have not so much a series of commandments – love God, love your neighbour, love yourself – as what Buddhist teaching might call a *koan* – an unanswerable question designed to wake us up and which over a lifetime of reflection may yield a multitude of possible resolutions, none of them complete.

No part of this teaching yields easy answers. What does it mean to love God with our whole being? Who is God for a start? What is my mind, my heart, my soul, to say nothing of my body? I don't even know how my little finger works, so what makes me think I can begin to contemplate God? Only when I realise this and might be about to give up, might I be ready perhaps to begin.

And what about the love of neighbour? As Jesus was asked in another place: *'who is my neighbour?'* The story of the good Samaritan which he offered is only the beginning of an answer to that. What is certain is that loving other people is a pretty difficult and often thankless task. As Brian McLaren writes: *"You can't learn to love people without being around actual people—including people who infuriate, exasperate, annoy, offend, frustrate, encroach upon, resist, reject, and hurt you, thus tempting you not to love them. You can't learn the patience that love requires without experiencing delay and disappointment. You can't learn the kindness that love requires without rendering yourself vulnerable to unkindness. You can't learn the generosity that love requires outside the presence of heartbreaking and unquenchable need. You can't learn the peacableness that love requires without being enmeshed in seemingly unresolvable conflict."*

In other words, it's not a particularly appealing or indeed attainable task. Again, only when we feel inclined to give up, might be we ready to begin.

And then, just when we thought we might be getting the hang of this, we realise there's another tricky twist – we are to love others '*as we love ourselves*'. Not more than ourselves – which is how Christian teaching has often presented it down the centuries; not less than ourselves which might be our inclination; but exactly as ourselves. So, if we begin to love ourselves better, we might start to love others better as well.

So - to take a ridiculous example for the sake of argument - does that include chocolate all round on Sundays? Or definitely not because the cocoa farmers are exploited (but they need the work to live) and the soy farming destroys the rainforest, and the sugar is bad, and it will make some of my neighbours sick – but if I say that I make another neighbour who loves chocolate feel bad – and at this point I have no idea what is loving for myself or anyone else; and being inclined to give up may perhaps be ready to begin? For it really is tricky.

It is probably not helped, at least in the modern world, by the idea that love has primarily to do with feeling and that if something feels good - or is at least designed to make someone else feel good, it is necessarily loving. In reality love may lead us to some actions that do not make us feel good, or others feel good, at any rate in the short term, and yet may nevertheless be the most loving option among a series of difficult choices.

We do the best we can with the wisdom we have and even then, long after may come as Eliot does in the Four Quartets, to the realisation of '*things ill done and done to others harm that once we took for exercise of virtue.*' It is tricky. We may be inclined to give up. And then we may be in a place to begin.

Let's take an example. It's the example given to us today by the gift of our lectionary – the story of Naomi, Ruth and Orpah. At first glance it's a story of familial love – the love of a daughter-in-law for her mother-in-law; a story of choosing the need of another over one's own need. At second glance it is potentially a story of romantic love – the deep love of one woman for another, finding expression in the most beautiful expression of marriage covenant found anywhere in scripture, that has become the foundation of especially lesbian wedding vows in recent times.

*'Where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die and there will I be buried.'* I love it, we all love it and we also recognise that a great deal more was being asked of these refugee women than just romantic affection. But let's also allow for a third glance. What about Orpah? Does she make a less loving choice? I don't think so.

Orpah chooses to do as her mother-in-law asks. Orpah chooses to love her own people, her own gods, her own land – and in doing so to love herself and in some measure perhaps to get out of Naomi and Ruth's way and thereby also to love them. Her very name – roughly translated as '*the nape of the neck*' – reflects a colonial view of her – the back of her neck signifying her turning her back and abandoning Naomi.

Yet in a different reading, she refuses to become hostage to the narrative of the conqueror, in this case ancient Israel. Hers is a dissident story, the story of a love that does not conform to the main narrative, just as much as that of Ruth and Naomi. She doesn't just take the path of least resistance; she chooses, the narrative tells us, to return '*to her mother's house*' – a very rare instance of the mother being favoured over the father in a patriarchal narrative.

Orpah thus offers love and hope to those cultures down the centuries who have chosen their own lands and gods over those of patriarchal conquerors – the land over the heavens, the goddess over the sky god.

For ourselves the love and study of our scriptures may take us in a different direction from the one we envisaged when we first heard the so-called great commandment – the great koan. For love is a tricky business, that does not have a straightforward conclusion. In the case of real love, very often there is no either/or. Love has to do with being able, without judgment, to see the fullness of both/and. Of both and! And and. And and. And can be without limit and only when we are ready to give up on comprehending its infinite possibilities, might we be ready to begin.

For the giving up is really important. Only when we recognise our own limits of capacity and understanding; only when we acknowledge our desperate need of grace; only when we move from the riches of thinking we know what we're doing and can control our own destiny to true poverty of spirit, can we truly begin to understand what it is to love.

If we go back to the story we had recently of the rich young ruler, we see there someone who wanted to do the big thing – having kept the commandments he wanted something grander, something that increased his importance in his own eyes. He wanted to do something great for God yet needed to start with his own self and acknowledging his own littleness as the place to begin.

Jesus told him he needed to give everything away and become like blind Bartimaeus, poor and helpless, but rich in knowing his own need. The point of giving up is the point where love begins – not in pride or power, but in absolute poverty, not in effort but in surrender.

In the human body every minute, three hundred million cells die – and replacements arrive. My head hurts at the number of zeros involved in the ending and beginning of cells in the last ten minutes I've been speaking to you just now, just for myself leave alone all of you! And I have almost no control over any of that – I give up!

All I can do is try as best I can to love – myself, my neighbour, God – starting from my inability to control even my little finger; and from there taking courage to begin again and again and again within the greater Love that surrounds and upholds us all.

In whose name, Amen.