

“Love involves all we are” a sermon based on Ruth 1:1-18 and Mark 12:28-34 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on Sunday 31 October 2021.

There was a builder who, at the end of each working day, before he walked through the door of his house, would go over and place his hand on a tree that was in the front yard. He did it every day. Then each morning, he reversed the routine. He would come out the door of his house, put his hand on the tree, and then leave for work. A neighbour noticed this and asked what he was doing. Well, said the builder, at the end of each day I leave the challenges and struggles of my work on the tree and when I leave the house in the morning, I pick them up again. My family doesn't need to hear all the things I deal with at work. It was a good ritual - trying to protect his family life.

Many of us try our best to separate off our private life and our public life. Sometimes we overestimate our ability to do it. When I was a lawyer, we had a judge who could be irascible, normally on Mondays. The lawyers would wait to see what kind of mood he was in to know what kind of day it was going to be. And if he was particularly irascible, we would try to adjourn our matter for a kinder day.

It is hard trying to keep our lives in compartments. When it comes to faith, compartments don't work at all. The prayer often used at the start of a Communion service begins with these words – “Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known and from whom no secrets are hid ...” It portrays life as open and known and transparent, at least to God. None of it hid away. The Christian faith deals with all we are. There is not a religious part and then the rest. Faith is not a compartment. Likewise, church is not a compartment. Faith and church engage all we are, all we do, all we seek to be. What a challenge that is at times, but also what a gift!

In a little while, we are ordaining and inducting Indira as an elder and inducting David as a deacon. When we take up a role in the Church, we bring all we are. Our strengths and our weaknesses, our language and our culture, our experience and our perspective. Leadership is best offered when we bring our whole selves.

And the church needs to function so there is room for all we are. It needs to function so what one person offers does not drown out what someone else offers. We need to make space for each other because diversity flourishes in space. Diversity makes a stronger church. It enables each of us to thrive and all of us to thrive together.

When the Church Council nominated Indie to be an elder, we wanted the different dimensions of Indie to be present: her Tamil culture, her several languages, her experience in Thailand and India and Australia, her experience of different churches, her academic passion for climate justice, all of who she is. And we knew as a Council, that we needed to make space for all that. We would need to adapt to another culture, another set of experiences, another approach that might question some of our instinctive patterns.

Church needs to be a place safe enough for everyone to bring all of who we are. In so doing, we experience, we feel how God says yes to who we are. From that yes, we experience a freedom that flows into the rest of our living.

Now to our readings ... It is good to read the whole of the book of Ruth, just four chapters.

The story begins in Bethlehem, the house of bread, but there is no bread. There is hunger. There is famine. So the family shifts to Moab. Then the breadwinner dies although the sons get married, but then after ten years they die. Now there are three widows, Naomi and her two daughters in law.

In Judah, laws were supposed to protect widows but it wasn't always so, and probably it was the same in Moab. Naomi's best way out of her vulnerability was to go back to Judah in the hope that her extended family would take her in. But for her Moabite daughters-in-law, the best future involved staying in Moab and getting married, because Judah was wary of marrying foreign women. Orpah wisely stays. Ruth irrationally chooses to go with Naomi.

What a sad pair they made! Naomi had left the famine of Bethlehem for a new life and now she was trudging home, with her Moabite daughter in law who had an uncertain future. There was a time, Naomi says, when my name meant "pleasant". Now, just call me "bitter", because that is what I am. There is hope though, for the barley harvest was just beginning. Bethlehem, the house of bread, might get bread.

The book of Ruth is a story of a damaged creation, of a famine and the journey people make as a result. It is a story of cross-cultural loyalties, of broken and grieving families and of a dislocated people. Now in various ways, this is who we are. This is the "all we are" that faith engages!

In these unpromising circumstances, there is love and loyalty. The Moabite Ruth to her Judean mother in law: "Where you go, I will go; 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. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well".

Beautiful words, words involving the whole of who Ruth is. Can we speak love and loyalty in these unpromising times?

This week, we stand again before the possibility of action or inaction about climate change, as leaders gather for COP26 in Glasgow. When we have every reason to be sceptical, can our leaders provide real action for the healing of creation? Can this world our home, can Bethlehem if you like, become again a house of bread? This week we bring concern for cross-cultural relationships, as COVID tracks differently for Maori and Pacifica. Can we become a united nation where our health system serves everyone equally? Will leaders listen to the Pacific church leaders present in Glasgow? And what of broken families - many of us are struggling to engage family opposed to vaccination or mandating vaccination. But with the new traffic light system, churches have hard choices to make. How do we reflect our banner of welcoming all people, of being inclusive, of being pastorally sensitive to

people unwilling to vaccinate and at the same time enable our gatherings to be safe for all people especially the most vulnerable? And this, where science and truth and evidence and research seem increasingly questioned.

Faith involves all we are. Church engages all we are. Love and loyalty arise from all we are.

Ruth's words are sometimes used to help people name their faith, the words addressed not to Naomi but to Jesus: "Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God."

Then there is the story in Mark. Mark has been telling us how bad the scribes are, how they keep asking Jesus trick questions to get him arrested and imprisoned. They want him to be seen as a trouble-maker, a heretic who needs silencing. And after all those exchanges, Jesus could rightly be suspicious when yet another scribe asks him a question. Is this scribe trying to trick me as well? But Jesus treats this man as if he is the first to ask a question. And after the exchange Jesus says that the man is not far from the kingdom of God, this to a man in a group out to get Jesus, with all of this happening in the Temple precincts.

In this place of dislocation, in a context of fore-boding, Jesus reaches across a deep divide to affirm what this one person offers. God loves all we are and invites us into that love.

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