

## **A Foreigner Teaches Us to Love**

*(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church on October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2021 - Mark 12:28-34 & Ruth 1:1-18)*

In my five or so years working with Persian Asylum Seekers at Brunswick I learnt a lot about love. Very quickly it went from me doing a good deed – teaching English, leading a bible study and sharing food to something very different. These people with very little financial means knew how to give and to share. These people welcomed me into their families – I had conversations with their family back home on the phone in Farsi and English, ultrasounds of expected babies were shared with me, special sweets were made for my Dad because they knew he liked them, I was offered food first and then they all had theirs, I was given some extraordinary gifts – a hand-painted picture, a Iranian tapestry, a special table cloth and floor rug. I felt truly welcomed into their families and their lives and all I did in return was teach the bible.

In our story today we have two widows, one a foreigner and we learn about love.

Ruth is a foreigner, she is from Moab. The story begins with her mother-in-law Naomi. There had been a crisis (famine) and Naomi and her family had left their home in Bethlehem to find relief in another place. They go to a place no Jewish would go to, Moab. There her husband dies and she finds herself a widow in a foreign land. Her sons eventually marry Moabites. Then tragedy strikes again and they too die, leaving her heartbroken and now a widow and childless in a foreign land. I imagine she felt helpless, uncertain and not sure what to do. She hears that the famine has broken back home, so, decides to return there to family and to relieve her daughters-in-law from any responsibility to care for her and so they can be free to marry again and build lives for themselves.

The two younger widows initially decide to go with Naomi, so, the three set off. Along the way, three times Naomi tells them to go back, to go back home to their families where they have a future, as, Naomi knew she could not provide a future for them back in Bethlehem. She knew their life would be difficult in Bethlehem, being foreigners. Orpah decides to follow the advice and returns home. Ruth is a lot harder to convince. Naomi again tells her to go home, to follow after her sister-in-law and go back home where the future would be brighter. Ruth can't let go. Ruth can't let this woman travel back alone. Ruth, it seems, cares deeply for her mother-in-law and feels a deep responsibility for her care.

It becomes obvious to Naomi that she will not be able to persuade Ruth to return home when Ruth offers, what I think, is the most beautiful declaration of love we find in the bible.

Let's listen to these words again.

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— there will I be buried. (Ruth 1:16-17)

Despite the potential difficulty, the two widows – husbandless and childlessness return to Bethlehem. It appears that Ruth has taken on the faith of her dead husband and converted to Judaism. She has taken the responsibility to look after Naomi very

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seriously. Perhaps she feels that she needed to take on what would have been the role of her husband. After a time where Ruth works hard to support her mother-in-law, their tragic lives take a turn for the better. Ruth remarries and has a child. We know how the story ends, Ruth becomes the great-great-great grandmother of Jesus and Naomi is no longer unhappy, in fact the entire community shares in their joy.

So, this foreigner teaches us of love. This is the kind of love which Jesus explains to the scribe, and that is required by God.

When asked about the greatest commandment, Jesus says are two and they are deeply connected. First, love God with your whole heart, soul, mind and strength. Love God with every ounce of your being. Second and they are connected, dependent on each other perhaps – love your neighbour as yourself. The second is the outworking of the first. This practice is much more important than sacrifices or ritual. This shouldn't have been a great surprise to the scribe, after all many times in the Hebrew Bible there are similar ideas. Hosea says God desires mercy rather than sacrifice. The Psalmist reminds us that God prefers a contrite heart rather than ritual. Amos and Micah have similar themes, that God hates offerings and sacrifices, whilst injustice prevails. Loving God with our whole being will always have a practical working, this is the kind of love Ruth showed.

When I was doing baptismal classes with a Persian man, he too wanted to know what the rules were, the rules he needed to obey to become a Christian. It took me a while to respond, he of course was looking for a list, like he had known in his Muslim faith. Eventually I said, there are just two – love God and love your neighbour. He said is that all, I said yes but we all know that is a lot.

Loving neighbour will often be hard but it is necessary. We worship a loving and compassionate God and there is no other way to follow in Jesus way, but to love. Whilst our songs and rituals and words are important as we express our love for God, they can never override our love for neighbour. Love for neighbour is the truest expression of our faith.

How will you love your neighbour? May the example of Ruth's commitment inspire you. May you know that love will always go beyond law. May you know that love will make a way.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbour as yourself, that is what the Lord requires. Amen,