**Sermon Pentecost 24B Sunday 31st October 2021**

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

Mornington, Glenaven and Mosgiel

Could it be that some words are over used?

Take the word love, we tag it to to a cluster of positive emotional responses to a range of things. A dear friend, a spouse, a favourite piece of music or book, a particular place. But any single word we can use to describe so much; our tenderest feelings, the deepest desires we can barely acknowledge to ourselves and a range of our favourite things is going to be rather stretched.

That is challenging for translators, often there is not one precise or particular word in one language for a word in another. Take love again. The one little word in English covers a multitude of meaning doesn’t it? Greek has seven words for love, four of which are used in different places in the *Bible*. Our experiences of love morph over time, even if our language lacks the flexibility to talk about it. A relationship might begin in *eros*; romantic, passionate, sexual love but over time it morphs into *pragma* which is about commitment and companionship.

Let’s talk eros for a moment; some people are addicted to the thrill of beginning, the headiness of infatuation and once that recedes lose interest in the relationship, they let it go and then seek an emotional hit from someone new.

Of course relationships have become a mainstay of reality TV. I wonder if those who say same sex marriage is a threat to the institution of marriage have anything to say about Marriage at First Sight. I avoid Reality TV, as a genre it seems both cruel and pretty stupid. As barbaric perhaps as the games used to entertain the masses in Rome.

I did by accident though discover one programme which I watch occasionally as a kind of guilty pleasure. It is called 90 Day Fiance and tells the stories of Americans bringing in foreign partners to the US and having, you guessed it, 90 days to marry them. Often they have only met briefly beforehand and you see declarations of love, of having found the one after a few texts and American men turning up at airports in South America, Eastern Europe or East Asia with an engagement ring ready to propose to almost perfect strangers.

It is gruesome watching in a way, sometimes people from poorer nations are so desperate to get a chance to move to the United States that they will tolerate pretty awful behaviour, likewise so many of the Americans on the programme are so bruised by former relationships and desperate to be with someone they seem profoundly needy and will likewise tolerate pretty awful behaviour just so they are not alone.

Is there love here? Really while I allow myself to be amused and appalled in equal measure I can’t say. Some of these situations do work out. But it is not the kind of love we see in the Bible in the readings we heard earlier and would not be described by the same word in Greek or many other languages.

We heard the beginning of the *Book of Ruth*, the story of a woman from Moab, Jordan, who when widowed goes with her mother in law Naomi back to the land of Judah. Her love and care for her mother in law and her embracing the faith and life of her new people. This foreign woman becomes a model of faithful love in Judaism and incidentally the great grandmother of King David. She honours the bond of love and connection with her mother in law and in doing so not only secures their future but contributes to the great narrative of the Jewish and then the Christian story.

In the Hebrew text the word used to describe her time and again is *hesed* , or – in English, loving kindness and each character in her story as it unfolds displays this. You see don’t you how one word in Hebrew needs two in English. Translation can be a tricky thing.

We then hear Jesus say love is the whole of the Law, love for God yes but also love for our neighbour, love for our fellow human beings. John Wesley’s notes on this text put it this way – and please forgive the gendered language;

*To love him with all the heart - To love and serve him, with all the united powers of the soul in their utmost vigour; and to love his neighbour as himself - To maintain the same equitable and charitable temper and behaviour toward all men, as we, in like circumstances, would wish for from them toward ourselves, is a more necessary and important duty, than the offering the most noble and costly sacrifices.*

Jesus tells his questioner that it is this love of God and people which matters, this love which is more significant than the observance of ritual or the offering of sacrifice and burnt offering. Jesus echoes her the teaching of the prophets who didn’t say that religious rictual doesn’t matter but unless it prompts us to be more loving, more humane, more just it is useless and worse.

Love for people then isn’t a happy accident or some kind of optional extra.

Love is at the core of faithfulness. Love other people as we love ourselves mmm …

What is it to love other people as we love ourselves, now we forget about loving ourselves sometimes don’t we?

Clearly the love here is not about romantic feelings, it is about wanting your neighbour to have the good things about life that you would wish for yourself. This might sound vague and nebulous to you, of course, who wouldn’t want this? But it has implications that need to be thought and lived through.

My own well-being, comfort, happiness and convenience cannot be at the cost of the disadvantage, or dislocation of others. My personal power, my group or nations power cannot be used to lever some advantage at the cost of another. Be that one person or a whole people.

it is about living rightly, justly. In the words of the theologian Cornell West *Justice is the order that love requires* or as he also said *Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public*.

West reminds us that Justice fundamentally has to do with right and good relationships. It is about conditions – material, emotional, and spiritual – in which people flourish in right relationships with God and with each other. When something damages or ruptures those relationships, doing justice involves setting things right.

In the last year as a member of the Board of Methodist Mission Southern I have been involved in education on the Treaty, not just as a historic document but as a continuing challenge to justice. A few weeks ago at Mornington I observed that “all things being equal they probably aren’t.” We know don’t we that a Pakeha child born to professional parents in Remuera is likely to have a longer, more successful , more secure life than a child born to Maori parents getting by on the East Cape. Truth to tell there is no solution to iron out every inequality, the variables are so many after all.

The children of clergy tend to do as well as the children of doctors and lawyers; though law and medicine pay better. But the children of clergy will, like the children of lawyers and doctors have parents who value education, they will grow up familiar with books , education will be encouraged and their health needs attended to well.

We cannot crate the same culture in every home, true enough, but we can do what we can to decrease inequality and its impact. We can seek to enflesh love through justice.

Let us be loving, let us be just and in doing so give honour to God

Amen