



A scribe came up to Jesus, with a question.

Unlike the others who came to Jesus on the attack, he wanted to know what Jesus thought. *"Rabbi, which commandment is the first of all?"*

We can, and do, understand this to be asking which commandment is the most important. But it's not *only* that. It's also asking, which is the one which comes first, on which all of the others rest? For Jesus, love for GOD comes first, just as it did for Moses and all of the other great ones in the story of Israel. In Deuteronomy 6 (which is styled as the great sermon of Moses as the people prepared to cross into the promised land), the commands and laws begin with the same words used by Jesus all those centuries later: love GOD with your heart, soul, mind and strength.

This is a really important story! For one thing, it reminds us once more of the way of faith and life which shaped Jesus: he was born, lived and died as a Jew. This was who he was. His words in these few verses place him firmly within the traditions of his people. Importantly, they show us how he honoured that tradition, and the relationship with GOD, by stating the heart of the tradition and relationship: Love GOD with all you have, and love your neighbour as you love yourself.

But Jesus goes further than Moses. What does love for GOD look like? It looks like loving your neighbour as you love yourself. Note: not *"as much as"*, but *"as"*.

This is about the quality of love, the character of love, and the way it is lived. What does this look like? It looks the same as the ways in which we are gracious to ourselves, make excuses for ourselves, celebrate our successes and regret our failings, want the best, and accept ourselves. It looks like that. At least when we get it right. This is inextricably linked with love for GOD.

Jesus didn't change the rules, or reinterpret them. He talked about what they had meant all along!

In the context of this conversation, Jesus changes the focus of the people around him. If we look at what goes immediately before, it's about obligations: about paying taxes, about whose wife in heaven would be the woman who'd married 7 brothers, about which of the obligations and sacrifices are the most important. (In

the case of the woman, she probably hoped ‘heaven’ would see her stop being someone’s possession!)

Jesus’ answer? Love. Love is at the core of all the commandments. Without love, the commandments have no meaning. (Sounds familiar?) The first, and most important commandment is to love.

“The GOD to be obeyed is the GOD of love and compassion and, by implication, that understanding will determine what keeping GOD’s commandments means” (Professor Bill Loader)

What does it mean, to ground our life in love for GOD, our neighbour, and ourselves? And if asking *“What does it mean?”* seems a little too abstract, try asking *“What does it look like?”* or *“What could it look like?”*

The story doesn’t tell us whether the man talking to Jesus asked that question. But I know a story that Jesus could have told him if he had asked. It would have begun like this:

“There was a woman, many centuries ago. Her name was Ruth”.

(see p3 for her story)

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Like Jesus, Ruth wasn’t a Christian. Ruth was in fact an ‘outsider’ to the people of Judah. She was a Moabite, at best a distant relative, and in fact relationships between the people of Judah and Moab were, shall we say... difficult.

“The Great Commandment” was only a distant part of Ruth’s heritage, if at all. But as we look at her story, I think we see it lived out in her.

Ruth’s story took place in a tribal world – set up by men, for men. In that story Ruth, her Mother in law Naomi, and her Sister in Law Orpah, all became widows.

The human tragedy of that is bad enough, especially for Naomi who lost her husband and her sons.

Even beyond that, though, is the social tragedy: these three women were now destitute, with no way of providing for themselves. And worse (if that’s possible), they effectively lost their identity, became ‘non-people’. Who they had been, was on the basis of being *“wife of”*, and *“mother of...”*.

Naomi had nothing left. She chose to go home, back to Bethlehem. And Ruth and Orpah went with her, at least at first. Orpah left when Naomi said to her and Ruth, *“Go back to your people, and let me go on alone to my people”*. To go with Naomi, meant leaving their community behind.

But Ruth would have none of it!

We heard this morning the part of the Ruth story that's perhaps the best known. It's Ruth's reply to Naomi's insistence that Ruth leave her and go home:

*"Don't force me to leave you. Where you go, I will go, where you live, I will live, your people will be my people and your GOD will be my GOD"*

Stirring stuff in itself, but even more when we think about what Ruth was actually doing. She was choosing to enter a foreign - often hostile – culture, where she could depend on no-one: to be an outsider, rather than desert a woman, who may not even have wanted her around.

Hers is such a radical, heartfelt, and determined declaration of love and devotion, that Naomi is struck dumb and runs out of arguments.

The story continues, and if you can manage it this week, I'd encourage you to read the whole book. It's short and easy reading, and it's a great study in love - deep, gutsy, vulnerable, life-affirming, life-changing, love - centuries before Jesus, but celebrating and living his truth.

Some say that Ruth's honour in the Scriptures is in becoming the grandmother of King David.

I respectfully disagree.

**Her honour is in being Ruth: the woman in whose compassion and love, Naomi saw her GOD!**

What does love look like?

Well for Jesus, just like all those generations of his people, it seemed to look like this

Like loving the Lord our GOD with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

Like loving our neighbour as we love ourself.

Like Ruth did!

## Mark 12:28-34

Then came up one of the teachers of the Law who had heard their discussions. Knowing that Jesus had answered them wisely, he asked him this question: "Which commandment is the most important of all?"

29 "The most important," answered Jesus, "is — 'Hear, Israel; the Lord our God is the one Lord; 30 and you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' 31 The second is this — 'You must love your neighbour as you love yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

32 "Wisely answered, teacher!" exclaimed the teacher of the Law. "It is true, as you say, that 'there is one God,' and that 'there is no other besides him'; 33 and to 'love him with all one's heart, and with all one's understanding, and with all one's strength,' and to 'love one's neighbour as one loves oneself' is far beyond all 'burnt offerings and sacrifices.'" 34 Seeing that he had answered with discernment, Jesus said to him: "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

## Ruth 1:1-19

In the time when the judges ruled, there was once a famine in the land. A man from Bethlehem in Judah took his wife and two sons to live in the territory of Moab. 2 His name was Elimelech and his wife's was Naomi, and his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. After they had been living in Moab for some time, 3 Elimelech died, and Naomi was left with her two sons, 4 who married Moabite women named Orpah and Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, 5 Mahlon and Chilion both died, and Naomi was left alone, without husband or sons.

6 So she set out with her daughters-in-law to return from the land of Moab, for she had heard that the Lord had remembered his people and given them food. 7 As they were setting out together on the journey to Judah, 8 Naomi said to her daughters-in-law, "Go, return both of you to the home of your mother. May the Lord be kind to you as you have been kind to the dead and to me. 9 The Lord grant that each of you may find peace and happiness in the house of a new husband."

Then she kissed them; but they began to weep aloud 10 and said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." 11 But Naomi said, "Go back, my daughters; why should you go with me? Can I still bear sons who might become your husbands? 12 Go back, my daughters, go your own way, because I am too old to have a husband. Even if I should say, "I have hope," even if I should have a husband tonight and should bear sons, 13 would you wait for them until they were grown up? Would you remain single for them? No, my daughters! My heart grieves for you, for the Lord has sent me adversity." 14 Then they again wept aloud, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth stayed with her.

15 Naomi said, "See, your sister-in-law is going back to her own people and to her own gods; go along with her!" 16 But Ruth answered, "Do not urge me to leave you or to go back. I will go where you go, and I will stay wherever you stay. Your people will be my people, and your God my God; 17 I will die where you die, and be buried there. May the Lord bring a curse upon me, if anything but death separate you and me." 18 When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she ceased urging her to return.

19 So they journeyed on until they came to Bethlehem.