

Jeff's Reflection – Oct 31, 2021

The word 'Bible' comes from the Greek 'ta biblia' meaning 'the books'.

In English, the word 'biblia' shapes our word 'Bibliography' – the listing of books consulted by an author – and our English word 'library'. The Bible is a 'library'. The Bible is a collection of various books written by various authors and gathered together as one book - as scripture; gathered over hundreds of years, by various people and committees.

So, we can read the Bible as 'a' book, reading it from cover to cover, from Genesis to the concluding words of the book of Revelation...

Or, we can come to the Bible as if we are entering a library. We can pull a certain book off the shelf, flip through it, read some pages, maybe sit down to read the book from beginning to conclusion, or maybe take another book off the shelf.

Perhaps some time may pass before our next visit to the library. When we return, we may recall something we read on our previous visit - there may be certain books, certain pages, readings, stories that we particularly remember, and somehow we know that in all our browsing and reading, at some time we will come back to those certain books, pages readings and stories.

Today's scripture readings are those kinds of stories for me. Both are Bible stories, passages, that I keep drifting back to, passages that I know say something significant about God and about faith and about how I read the rest of the Bible.

The first story comes from the book of Ruth.

It begins as a story of refugees – of a man Elimelech and his wife Naomi and their two sons. The family lives in Bethlehem in Judah. There is a climate crisis – a famine – crops fail, there is a food shortage, so the family leaves the land of Judah and goes to the land of Moab, and they settle there.

And then there is family crisis and tragedy. Elimelech dies. Naomi is widowed. Her sons fall in love and marry two women of Moab whose names were Orpah and Ruth. And then the family tragedy continues and both of Naomi's sons die, and Orpah and Ruth are also now widows.

After living in the country of Moab for 10 years, Naomi, grieving the deaths of her husband and children, decides to go back to Judah, back to her land, her people, back to relatives, back to her traditions, back to the people who worshipped and whose lives were shaped by the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Jacob, the God of Moses, the God who responded to the cries of those enslaved.

The passage for today from the book of Ruth, tells of the day Naomi is leaving Moab to

return to Judah. Her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, set out to go to Judah with her.

But Naomi tells Ruth and Orpah to go back to their family in Moab, to go back to the homes of their parents, to remain in the land they know, the community in which they have lived their entire lives, and to continue to worship the gods of the Moabites - for the God of Judah and the commandments and laws of the Jewish people, are foreign to them. Naomi speaks out of love, to tell her daughters-in-law that they are already home, and they should continue their grieving and their living in the place and culture which they know and in which they feel at home.

What she says makes sense. It is heart-wrenching, but it makes sense. So Orpah, in tears, says good-bye to Naomi and returns to her home in Moab.

But Ruth makes a different choice. Ruth responds with the words that come back to me whenever I think of this story; the words that probably come back to many when they flip through the index of the Bible and see the word "Ruth"; the words often read during marriage ceremonies.

We are not told why Ruth speaks these words – is it loyalty to Naomi, is it a desire to experience something new, is she in some way wanting to be a refugee from Moab?

We aren't told. We are told the words that are so moving to so many:

"Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you. Where you go, I will go; where you live, I will live; your people will be my people; ...and...and your God will be my God! May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you."

Words of love, words of promise, words of loyalty, words of friendship, words that commit one's life to be lived in relation and as a companion to another.

The book of Ruth goes on to tell of Ruth marrying Boaz, a relative of Naomi. Ruth and Boaz give birth to a son, whom history will remember as the grandfather of David, the second king of Israel, and for many, the idealized shepherd become king who could display such frail humanness and such great faith.

One passage from one book nestled in this library we call the Bible. One of the passages in one of those books to which I will return when I visit this library.

Our second passage today is in the book entitled 'The Gospel according to Mark.' A scribe comes to Jesus. A scribe was one of the learned people, a person who studied the Jewish laws and scriptures.

The scribe hears Jesus in a vigorous discussion – so vigorous it is referred to as a debate. The scribe is impressed that Jesus, this teacher from the northern region of Galilee, is not only holding his own in this debate, but is offering insightful responses.

So the scribe decides to ask Jesus a question central to their Jewish faith:
“Which commandment is the first of all?”

Sometimes Jesus responds to questions by telling a story. Sometimes Jesus responds with words that seem intended to confuse and send people away pondering.

But this time, Jesus answers very clearly.

Jesus says, “The first commandment is ‘Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’”

The scribe, the student of the Jewish scriptures, recognizes this answer. It is found in another of the books in this library we call the Bible. The answer is found in the book called Deuteronomy: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and with all your strength.”

The first commandment is “Hear, Listen, Pay attention to GOD” – and love God with everything you are; with your senses, your mind, your heart, your will, your feelings, your soul – everything!

The first law of life is that God is One, that everything exists within the Oneness of God, that the human relationship to God is that of love, all creation is bound together by relationship, by love, by living out of the Oneness of God, living to affirm the Oneness of God.

The Lord our God is One – God is the Being in which all being exists; God is the Life from which all life emerges.

Jesus doesn’t wait for a response before adding the observation, “The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these two.”

There is a first commandment, but there is a second and no other commandment is greater than these two ... as if the two are joined in greatness, as if these two dance together and in naming the best dancer you must name the best dance partners.

If we stop at “love God”, we may limit ourselves to a nice feeling – ‘I love God’- or to a nice sentiment – ‘I love God’. I love God and then get on with doing whatever I want, living however I want, being whoever I want to be.

Jesus links loving God to enacting God’s love; links loving God to loving those whom God loves.

‘Love your neighbour as yourself’: For both yourself and neighbour are created by God, our expressions of God, are participants in the Sacred, are embodiments of God’s

sacredness in the world.

Love neighbour as yourself, because if we want to meet God we need to be where God is to be found – in love that honours everyone, in love that feeds everyone, in love that sees every child as a child of God who matters, in love that sees that every person is created in the image of, out of the imagination of, God. In love that rejects violence, that affirms the diversity of humanity created in God's image, that respects, honours and learns to live in harmony and peace with all God's creation.

Jesus links the first and second commandments, not so they are two in one, but so that they are one-in-two. One love expressed in two acts of love – love of God and love of neighbour. This first-and-second commandment, this one-in-two commandment, tells us that God lives in heaven and on earth, that in this life we are God's dance partners, and together we are dancing into just relations and peace in the world.

This joining of first and second commandment tells us that the words of Ruth to Naomi are to be our words, our commitment to God:

Where you go, God, I will go.

Where you are present, God, I will be present.

Your people – those You call neighbour, friend, beloved, shall also be my people, neighbour, friend, beloved.

In this library of the Bible, are the books, the stories, the poetry, the songs and the words that open us to a new reading of reality, to a new way of living in this world, to a life of faith that loves God/loves neighbour.

In this library, may we be nurtured in the faith that loves God and loves God's people.

Thanks be to God. AMEN!