

Importance and centrality of relationship; that we are made for relationship with each other and with God.

Let's reflect together on the readings that we've heard this morning. Let's pray. "May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, God, our rock and our redeemer, Amen."

Today Jesus has a word to us on love, a famous word, what he calls the greatest commandment. I recently heard from someone whose spiritual practice, one of their spiritual practices, was to take the hymn on love from Corinthians that says, "love is patient, love is kind, love does not boast". How many times have we heard that reading at weddings and at other times celebrating love?

But when he would read this passage, instead of the word love, he would substitute it with his own name, and he would say, "Nicky is patience. Nicky is kind. Nicky does not boast. He is not proud. He does not dishonour others. He is not self-seeking."

And as he would say these words, he'd be spiritually alert to what they were saying to him. He'd be looking for where there were moments of that pin prick of unease where he realized, actually I've not been like that recently. He'd look out for movements in his heart where he'd be moved to repentance or recognizing an area that he could improve on or seeing what memories it stirred for him. And sometimes he'd do this and sometimes he'd stop himself where he felt he could not say it honestly. Nicky is patient, Nicky is kind. Nicky does not boast. But he'd always say he'd never get past the first one, because when he just read the first one he recognized "I can't even say that truthfully. We're were always pushing on. We're always imperfect and growing."

On our lectionary today, it tells us the story of Ruth and Naomi and I read those words to you from Ruth at the start of our service today. "Wherever you will go, I will go and where you will stay, I will stay, your people will be my people and your god, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me." It's a beautiful image of what love and relationship is. Ruth says to Naomi, even though our legal familial ties are broken, even though I don't owe you anything, even though we are in relationship only in our hearts, I'm going to love you, voluntarily of my own will, I'm going to love you. I'm going to try to love you so much that if even death separates us, I will count it as my fault because I haven't loved you as much as I wanted to.

As was kindly mentioned just before, I got married about a month ago, and before I got married, I said those words to my now wife, where you will go, I will go and where you

will stay, I will stay and your people will be my people and your God, my God. And this had a particular resonance because my wife Liz is a Indian Pentecostal and one week after our wedding and we'd had our ceremony and our reception, one week after our wedding, we had another event and Liz's father, who is a pastor of an Indian Pentecostal church, said to us, "you have the wedding that you want, and then a week later we'll have the wedding that I want".

And so my father-in-law booked a dining room in Box Hill Town Hall and Lizzie and I went down there a week after we got married and we were celebrated by 200 Indian people that I didn't know and Lizzie variously knew. We were celebrated and we were congratulated and my father-in-law got a gilded big couch that he sat at the front of the dining room that Lizzie and I sat on and we were adored and marvelled at by the people in the room . I got up and I said, again I said, we're united by Christ because it was a church lunch that he had organized for us.

But my tradition is not Pentecostal. I don't come from a Pentecostal tradition and it may surprise you to learn that I am not Indian. But I said that in the way that you have embraced me and the way that I, in return, embrace you, we have become one people with one God. And in this strange mystical way, these people that might otherwise have never met or had anything to do with each other were unified in this mysterious and loving way.

We are meant for relationship with each other. It's not something that's secondary. And the story in genesis that came up on the lectionary a few weeks ago affirms that to us. When God makes Adam in the story of Genesis, he says it's not good for this creature to be alone. If this creature is alone, they will not flourish, they will not deliver the life that I want them to live.

We're made for a relationship with each other. It is central to our absolute purpose, and our culture will often say to us that your relationships can wait. Work on your career, achieve the goal that you are working towards, get all your work done, sort out your garden, see your friend, but your most special relationships they can wait until you've got more time. It's like we're climbing to the top of a hill and we say, oh, once I get to the top of that hill, then I can rest, and I can dedicate myself to my relationships.

But there's always another hill. Cultural always give us another hill. Jesus says, don't let your relationships be an afterthought. Make them who you are. And when we feel the pain of broken relationships, when we are betrayed or when we are let down, or when marriages that we hoped to die with end or when friends that we thought we could trust prove to be untrustworthy or when we are dishonoured by parents or siblings or

children, we feel the pain of that relationship to signpost reminding us of what we're made for. It reminds us that there is a perfect life of relationship that we're made for, that we fit into, that we're called into, that we're made to be as our purpose. Your relationship are not disposable.

So Jesus calls loving the Lord and loving your neighbour as the greatest commandment that fulfills all of the law. "You shall love the lord your god with all your heart and your soul and all your mind, and your strength, and you shall love your neighbour as yourself." Jesus names love as a holistic embodying reality that infuses every part of us. That's not put in a box but overflows and fills us completely. It's like blood vessels and ligatures that connect us from one to another and from different parts of us into one unified whole.

So, I wonder what it might mean to love in these different modes, these four different ways that Jesus speaks of. How can I love with my heart? Perhaps by diving into the river of worship, heedlessly and unashamedly, perhaps by waking up with a prayer, helps by breaking down the brittle walls that I've built up that hold me back by laughing warmly and generously, perhaps with a handwritten letter that I've posted and mailed.

How can I love with my soul? Perhaps by watching lovingly and longingly as the wind turns the branches of a tree. Perhaps by standing still at the summit of a hike and letting the sun bathe my face. Perhaps by listening to the voice of the spirit as it speaks quietly inside me, by sharing an unhurried meal with someone I love. How can I love the lord with my mind? Perhaps by lingering over scripture and poetry, perhaps by crying over a novel or a film with long undistracted conversation. Maybe with letters to the editor or the sweeping contemplations of star gazing.

How can I love the lord with my strength? Perhaps with a long walk or volunteering in a food bank or a cafe. Perhaps by helping a neighbour move or by joining a dusty march up to parliament house under the shade of placards, by eating well and setting my table for a friend, by standing between a bully and their prey. May God help me to love like this, to love in these four sacred moments with my heart, my mind, my soul and my strength. Amen