

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

God's Love, Our Wisdom

There is a famous cluster of paintings, to which many great artists have contributed, made up of the contrasting images we have of love. Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love* is a great example, showing the figure of a tremendous lady in silks and jewels, seated at one end of an ancient carved tomb. She is Profane, earthly, Love. At the far end of the tomb is an equally beautiful but semi-naked figure, who surprisingly turns out to be Sacred Love (nakedness was symbolic of purity and innocence during the Renaissance; how much of them we have lost!) These two ladies are not arguing with each other, and Eros, the baby god of Love, is rooting around in the tomb between them. Another way of representing this contrast is to show Eros (Cupid) in two guises. One story tells how Venus, his mother, is anxious because he doesn't appear to be growing up. Eros tells her that what he needs is a brother to encourage him. She gives him a brother called Anteros, who comes to symbolise reciprocated love, love that grows because it's returned. The brothers are sometimes shown fighting, sometimes reconciled. You can tell that the artists are trying to suggest that love has to develop and grow if it is to be fruitful.

God's Love: Fulness of Wisdom

Love that is fully-grown is love that is like God's love. The greatest wonder of the people of the Renaissance was their belief that love could eventually make human beings share in that divine power. They read this truth in the ancient writers - Plato above all; but they also read it in the Scriptures - in the Gospel above all. They understood that the truth dimly grasped by the ancient classical thinkers and the ancient religious myths was in harmony with the truth Jesus proclaimed: that human beings, by God's merciful help, could aspire to unlimited truth, and a perfecting power of love called grace. Once truth was embraced with love in the human heart, then God's Wisdom - the Holy Spirit - would rest over earthly lives, and "mere men would eat the bread of angels". The works of men and women would then be opened up to the beauty of divine wisdom, and they would build an earthly city whose light was God himself, a civilisation where love would reign, and peace would be restored between us and our earthly environment. It was a noble dream, and it produced not only the most

fabulous outpouring of genius and beauty in our history, but also a register of sanctity and religious creativity which still inspires us.

The Empire Strikes Back

Sadly, ideals usually hit the iceberg of evil, and the Renaissance perished from the twin evils of greed and hatred. The stupendous work of the artists became treasure-trove, and the cities of Italy were poisoned with faction and war. There arose a friar called Savonarola, who told the Florentines to burn not only their vain possessions and luxuries, but their art and their books as well. It was a tragic loss of faith in humanity, and the God who took flesh so that we might become divine seemed to recede in favour of a darker, punishing divinity. It was as if Anteros had waged bitter war on his family.

Lord, You Love All That Exists

The lovely meditation from the Book of Wisdom in today's Mass gives us the first words of Lent, that great season of realism and hope. It reminds us that love is still the foundation of the world, that God never repents of making us, and that everything that exists, is loved. If we sometimes falter in our pilgrimage, wondering if we will ever purify our hearts, or find the right way to love the world around us in all its cruelty and power, these words can take us by the shortest way to the heart of God. *If you had hated anything, you would not have formed it.* My experience of people assures me every day that these words are vital to us, that every one of us needs to receive them and feed on them, even daily. *God makes nothing he doesn't love.* To grow up into wisdom and truth is to know that and to cling to it. It will let us accept ourselves as loveable, and all others as loveable, and all our life as lovable. That is the shape of a wise heart, a heart formed in the wisdom of God. It isn't an easy piece of consoling platitude because it contains a commandment, which John wrote out for us in his Letter: *Anyone who loves the Father, loves the child that he begets.* To grow up in the love of God, we must replace all the unwisdom, hatred and condemnation which scars our humanity, with the obedient readiness to love as God loves. The truth of the vision remains. God has made us for himself. We shall be fulfilled only when his wisdom makes its home in us. *Fr Philip*