

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Love Is All You Need

This was the Beatles' formulation of the central affirmation of Christianity, though the rest of the song is actually a pretty messy compôte of wet twaddle, set to a very catchy tune! One of the refrains that keeps recurring in it is *It's easy*. Well, that it isn't, for most of the time for most people in most places. Still, there is a point here, which I'll come to.

Omnia Vincit Amor

"Love Beats Anything" is another good line, this time from Virgil: and he goes on: *so let us too give in to it*. I wonder how far we could recognise Christianity in the sad picture of Gallus from which the line comes. The people in the poem all seem resigned to faithful but disappointed love, devoting themselves to rural basket-weaving and feeding flat-nosed goats. Hmm. Love that you *give in to* like that doesn't sound very positive.

Ama Et Fac Quod Vis

"Love, and do what you like" is Augustine's motto, and the hidden fish-hook in that is in the proper understanding of "love". Of course Augustine is very close to St Paul in today's Mass: *Love is the only thing that cannot hurt your neighbour*. I can see Virgil disappearing over the horizon at these words, and with him, I suspect, a good many hurt neighbours who got hurt when they thought they were going for love. But it's good to know that, if it's the right sort, love is something that's safe for the people you love. It may not, as Paul and Jesus both knew, be "safe" for you. It's *not* easy!

To Give, And Not To Count The Cost

This was an ideal of St Ignatius of Loyola, a spectacularly live wire who liked love to be active. He leads me to the point about the line at the top. When what you're doing is done out of love, it does become its own reward, even when it's exhausting and devoid of any pay-off. Why do new mums make do with three hours of sleep a night and mostly stay cheerful and rosy about being mothers? It must be that stuff that "beats everything" coming out of them. But if they're suffering a leaky battery, if the "love" that is driving them is wounded or damaged in some way, it can quickly run them into the ground in a way that feels like disaster. I think this is what happens when a mother has no more to give, and is beyond the point of exhaustion,

and strikes a child. It isn't some kind of active cruelty coming out, but a complete inanition, where she has given everything she had to offer, and can bear the cry of her comfortless child no more. What is remarkable to me is that this happens so seldom, and that ordinary people bear burdens impossible to contemplate rationally, often completely alone. The way in which a loving man or woman remains faithful to a wife or husband with dementia, long after they've ceased to know who it is that is combing their hair or holding up a spoon or a cup to their lips, is, I think, a miraculous thing to contemplate.

When Someone Goes Wrong

Today's Scripture may seem to be far from this meditation on selfless love. But it isn't. When another person steps off the road of love and faith, it may be completely without awareness of what he's done. It's perfectly likely that an onlooker sees more of the game, that I'm in a position to warn him of his danger. Few positions feel less secure than this one. Suppose he tells me to mind my own business? Suppose he thinks I'm a self-righteous creep who wants to interfere in his life for some pay-off of my own? It's quite possible that my best-intentioned attempt to help may be greeted with sharp and stinging rejection.

Faithful Love Delights in The Truth

Nevertheless, it is not a loving thing to stay away from a friend who is in danger of losing something precious. Ezekiel tells us today that God will hold us responsible for his loss, unless we do what we can to warn him and share with him our fears and what wisdom we have to offer. I can tell you that this is a fearful line for any priest to read; how could the priest of any Catholic Parish today read it without trembling? But the Gospel goes even further, telling us to go to great lengths: bringing another to reason with him, involving the whole community, and finally, if nothing has worked, to excommunicate him. (Yes, this is gentle Jesus, speaking in the Gospel!) There's no trace here of the kind of broadminded "morality" that sees no evil, hears no evil, and speaks no evil. The words Jesus spoke to Peter about binding and loosing are here applied to the whole Church. It is a solemn charge on each of us to tell the truth in love.

Fr Philip