

## The One Thing

“There is one thing I ask of the Lord; for this I long: to dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life.” Desire is near the heart of human experience, because it expresses the human capacity for self-giving. The concept of *a single desire* is the most beautifully attractive one. All the best stories are about single-hearted longing. We are immediately interested in people who have a burning vision, in whose name they are prepared to spend everything, lose anything. There’s a paradox here: if we can’t share this love, or sympathise with it, we call the subject *obsessed*, and see him as enslaved; sometimes rightly. Alcoholics are single-minded: train-spotters or beer-mat collectors can be too. And so, sometimes, are terrorists and stalkers. It seems that “the one thing” to which we give our heart may also be “the wrong thing”.

### Everybody Loves A Lover

There’s no quarrelling with real love. I’d say that I’ve seen some pretty extraordinary forms of it in my time, even in churches on wedding-days. The very *least* that can be said is what Sam Butler said of the Carlyles, that their finding each other was a blessing to the rest of humanity, because “It made only *two* people miserable instead of four”! The wonder is that so many people are made happy, and that is a *huge* blessing to the rest of humanity. Courting is a business that takes up great resources, *and that is how it achieves its aim*. Total absorption is deeply attractive to us: and to realise that someone is totally absorbed in *me* is one of the most unnerving, but also potentially most exciting, of experiences. Total attention...to make great art, it is essential. The rapt expression on the face of a musician expresses it. It is what we contemplate in the athlete going into overdrive on the last bend of the track, or in the dogged marathon runner crossing the fourteen-mile marker: perhaps most of all in the javelin thrower or jumper at the point of delivery. But so often we see it: and in the little crowd of passers-by who watch a hole in the ground being dug, or the little child gazing on while somebody else kneads dough or whittles runner-beans, we can see the attraction at work. There was a time when the present writer used to sit down to paint a

picture. I used to find this the most absorbing of tasks, and I felt physically rested and recharged after doing it. I now no longer have the time; and I find it is because I’m doing three-and-a-half things at once, not giving my full attention to any one of them

### The Scale Of Perfection

God doesn’t save us behind our backs, but with our consent and co-operation. If he has set in our hearts the capacity for desire, it is not so that we can die disappointed. It is up to us to refine and direct our desires until they can truly express our highest and deepest self, what we used to call our soul. There is a scale of perfection here. It is good to long for comfort, but it is better to long for peace. It is good to long for pleasure, but better to long for joy. It is good to want tidiness, but better to want beauty. And so on. We grow and change; some of our experience looks like compromise, as we learn the limitations of being human. I prefer to think that we are discovering the hidden presence of God in the humblest places, or as Blake says, “To see a World in a Grain of Sand, And a Heaven in a Wild Flower, Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand, And Eternity in an hour.” He wasn’t a Catholic, but Blake in those lines was speaking sacramentally. It sounds overwhelmingly grand *to long to live in the house of God all the days of my life*. The miracle is that it is the key to living *here* all the days of my life. Desire that is refined – and *concentrated* – does not find itself driven off the end of the earth. It finds itself living with total absorption *wherever it is*. This is the insight of the monastery, and it’s astonishingly close to the insight of a long, deep marriage. Such people are the despair of present-buyers, because they seem to want nothing and to need nothing. There is the paradox again: *only one thing I ask*, and it might be thought I have lost the power to desire. Nothing could be further from the truth. Desire is, it seems to me, the hidden gift of fulfilment. Perhaps one day I shall be able to carry all my desires directly into prayer, so that the inner workings of my own heart will be recruited for the Kingdom of God. Then perhaps my deeds too will be given to building it up on earth.

*Fr Philip*