

Talk 2 Relationship - the Judgment of God

YESTERDAY we discussed the impact, on our understanding of humanity, of the realisation that there is in the heart of God, not a monarchical Self, but a vital community of equal Persons, and that the way to understand our own being “in the image and likeness of God” is not to meditate on selfhood, but to meditate on relationship.

Today I would like us to think practically about our lives, and to look forwards as well as backwards. The point about knowing God is that we have so much to look forward to; if we are destined to inherit the power to love that God enjoys, then our lives must take on a pretty intensive programme of conversion: we are a new kind of project, and the prototypes of a new Creation. We must be careful never to pray that we stay the same: to be alive is to change, and to be holy is to change fast.

There are some people who think that belief in God devalues our life here on earth. If the real action is in the Kingdom of Heaven, they argue, then one can afford to let this life go to hell until we get to the half-crown side. This pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die attitude is rightly pilloried for being a recipe for immoral carelessness, or a way of exploiting the poor, who are content to be rubbished in this life in the name for a reward in the next. I hope we've reached the understanding that *the life we are offered in God's presence is hugely enhanced now*. I'd go further than that, and say that knowing Christ is a positive liberation from the damaged experiences our human nature goes through when it's left to itself. This realisation enables you to grow in tolerance and forgiveness of the people around you, and even of yourself. You can afford to relate more freely, despite the inadequacy and brokenness of the life you have to offer, and of the lives you receive, in relationship.

Let us think for a while about a really powerful relationship, one which we would call by the honourable name of love. Let us think about falling in love; and it's got to be mutual. It's a sad fact that many loves are unreturned and even unwelcome. But not always! Let us think of a love that is generously reciprocal

One of the things that happens is that I'm so surprised that this unbelievably fanciable person has actually got time for me. I wonder why the rest of the world is not cutting me out, and why it is that this superb person seems actually content to be alone with me. It is clear that love gives the lover great power for good: you can tell someone you love huge truths: you can assure them they are loveable, and in such a way that they come to believe it. We have all seen people who have discovered love like this: they shine with a sort of newborn and incomprehensible joy, as if they don't know whether to laugh or cry.

The experience brings with it a quite new sense of *wholeness*. When you are in love, and you are experiencing the return of your love, you have a marvellous experience of integration: it feels as if, for the first time, you've got your life together, you can understand it properly; and this is partly at least because you know you can give it all, and it can all be welcomed and received. by the person you love. This is an absolutely explosive concentration of human power. But it is not an end in itself. It is an auxiliary experience leading us on to something further, something yet more powerful; and we can destroy it if we attempt to treat it as the terminus of our experience.

I am also knocked back by the realisation love brings of the preciousness of human life. In this one person, who has become so important to me, I have discovered the dimensions of human value. Nothing is too good for them, they can ask anything of me, and I shall only be

too honoured to say yes. In this I feel as if I have suddenly joined the human race: this is the state which gives rise to generosity and self-sacrifice, it is a world that has suddenly achieved new and vast dimensions. Perhaps we may even feel that this is where heroes and heroines live.

There is another possibility, in sharp contrast: falling for someone else can plunge us into that distortion and unreliability which comes with a great emotional charge. People in love can become obsessive, almost solepistic, shut off from the world in the crucible of their own emotions. We have seen moonstruck lovers, who can't bear to be out of one another's company, and can't be bothered to relate to anyone else. We've also seen a relationship like that going slightly sour, as one of the parties begins to feel strongly that something's wrong. Suddenly the relationship is burdened, not liberating, and however much we may resist the awareness, both of us know. There is a sense of unvoiced feelings, of unspoken truths, of truths too painful to be said. Here is a relationship which is faltering, which is on the brink of delivering a wound which will be as powerfully painful as once it delivered joy. The love which enhances the power to give life also enhances the power to give pain.

What difference does it make to believe in God? Plenty.

Knowing what we know about the Creator, we can say from the beginning that what we see in other people that is loveable is certainly the image and likeness of God. As soon as you have said that, you will see a new way of understanding human love. When I love you, it is because I have been given a privileged glimpse of what God thought of when you were being designed. In you, I have caught a glimpse of God. Through you, I have entered into the knowledge of God. Thus the huge turn-on.

We can make a second point: human beings are *reflectors* of the glory of God. What they are, what they have, is planetary, orbital, to the life of God. God doesn't make us, and then kick us into the wastes of the universe. God's presence never leaves us, and we never leave God's orbit of influence. Really understanding moonlight, even at midnight, means being aware of the presence of the sun, and really understanding human beings means remembering God. It is God's light that makes them shine so beautifully.

Now here is the third point, and I take it to be vital: the intention of God in creating us, was that we should come to know him and love him *in himself*. Loving the people he has made is only a stage on the way - not the end term of the process. The journey for a lover doesn't end with a marriage and a mortgage and a crew of demanding teenagers praying to be delivered from family life with him. The end of a lover's pilgrimage is to enter and see the face of God, whose light has come to him or her by reflection, but now face to face.

The understanding of that ulterior meaning to our relationships doesn't just refer to the far future: it refers to the present. God isn't a long stop in another world. God is *present*.

We have to learn how to look for God, find God, listen to God, trust God, lean on God and be carried by God towards our destination, which is God. If we do this wisely and constantly, the effect on our relationships will be dramatic. It means that we shall be looking to God for our salvation, and not expecting - even unconsciously - to find it in the poor people he has enabled us to love. We cannot rest the whole burden of our lives on another human being, however kind or willing. Human nature isn't built for it. Only God has that kind of authority, that kind of power, that *right*. I can love you, and be as faithful as I can, but I can't ever give you the ultimate reasons for your, or my, life, character, inheritance, or experience, or the response you or I make to any of it. Nor, though I love you with all my might, can I save you from the power of death. I've come to believe that this is the real reason why the negative realities are there in our experience. This is a breathtaking piece of thought, but not one entirely foreign to the Scriptures, or to poets. When we are overwhelmed by the beauty of the world, or of the people who are dearest to us, there are usually enough thorns in the flesh to remind us not to be carried away.

If we are living our lives in the presence of God, the ultimately mysterious Maker, then we can learn to entrust those questions and perils to the only one who can answer them, and we can share between ourselves the humility which is able to welcome the burdens and joys God has invested in us. We are content, in the delirium of being “in love”, not to ask too closely what is happening to us, or to rush to judgment too fast. As relationships become deeper, we grow in critical awareness, and the temptation to find one another wanting can finish off in us the sense of privilege and delight that was so absorbing. Humility is the virtue of truthfulness - whole truth truthfulness - which can keep us in touch with the future dimension in our relationship.

A relationship conducted in the presence of God as I have described it differs in kind from a relationship that is obliged, as it were, to present its credentials and justify itself at all points. Relationships don't break down over one thing. They can break down in manifold ways. But one of the ways is certainly the judgmental attitude that seeks for a clear pay-off at the end of every day. Leaving judgment to God directly favours human relationships; finding meaning in God is directly nutritive of the qualities human love can lose under the demands of our poverty, weakness, and unwisdom. It is possible for human beings to discover endless pleasure in one another, but it is equally possible to find the demands of another person truly intolerable. In this sense, relationship itself cries out for God, to validate and direct us, to find us a way through to life.

What I have said today about love is true of friendship too. Friendship is the sort of love that grows more slowly, less dramatically; it is, I sometimes think, more reliable, more comfortable, and more valuable than much that goes by the name of love in the world. I find that genuinely selfless friendship is something many marriages struggle to achieve; but it is a true path to Christ's love; there is a real mystery in the fact that Jesus, who came to call us *friends*, never married, and yet laid down his life for us.

My point in this retreat has been that the relationship we find with God is actually the pearl of great price, the reason for the whole game, the one last prize that pays for all losses. If I have learned anything from an assiduous pursuit of love, on my own behalf as well as on others', it is that the love of God, honoured and enjoyed in intimate and personal terms, is the essential mortar in the human house, the rock on which we rickety mortals can safely be built.