

THE LAST THING THIS TERM NEEDS

God's Love

The hardest reality to discuss must be the way in which God's love for us relates to our use of the word love to describe human relationships. The *word* is the same, but the *reality* seems at first to be so different as to be almost contradictory. There seems to be an element in divine love which is so demanding, so absolute, as to require of its beneficiaries such realities as *repentance, conversion, worship, sacrifice, even martyrdom*. Love which demands such a degree of change in the beloved would, we feel, not be appropriate between humans.

This means that we have to recognize, in a very humble and honest way, the truth about human love *as we have known it personally*; we need not, therefore, waste time on the imagined truth we meet in fantasies - our own, or those of others; we seek the true reality to which we can bear personal witness. This honesty will determine the success of the operation.

God is love This short sentence from John's first letter gives us our terminus. Where there is a difference between what we call human love, and what we experience in God, it is the human experience which needs to examine its credentials. So what are our perceptions about the love of God - and those about human love which seem to be at odds with it? I can offer a few suggestions, which are personal ones.

Partiality In love there is the desire for totality. We want to know and love the whole of the beloved; even their flaws and failings are dear to us, and we want to share all their burdens and heal all their unhappiness. We want, for our part, to be loved *thoroughly*, and to feel that this unifies and integrates our lives. We want to feel known, accepted, appreciated, sometimes forgiven; we want to feel that the one we love wants us to be there, to live, and to be ourselves, with the same intensity with which we long for them. We want to be all in all for each other.

I do not think this is how it goes. I think that it asks too much of another human being; but there is something more serious. I cannot receive, from a fellow-human, the permission to be who I am. It is not theirs to give or to withhold. Even my parents did not *create* me the person I am; they made no choices about my being or personality. The urge to find in another human person the reason to be myself, and to live and work and suffer, *is a wrongheaded one*, however widespread; and by suggesting it is wrong, I mean that it will end in tears and do great damage.

Human love is partial. Even at its best it needs to acknowledge its selfishness, its use of the impulses of need and dependence. This isn't a reason to turn away from it. It is only a reason to modify our image of what it can be, and not to look to it for what it can't. If we are regularly asking more of it than it can accomplish, we cannot be surprised at the ghastly divorce figures, and all the ugliness, cruelty, violence, and pain which have been inflicted by the deceived people who have run close to destroying one another in the making of them. They feel betrayed, refused, and disappointed, as if they have discovered some deep and tragic disability that is personal to them: why could we not make it work? What is wrong with him/her/us?

Inequality We have a fond desire for total mutuality in love; that our shared life will be an experience of wondrous balance, each affirming and each being affirmed with a perfect complementarity. To our dismay, we find our unequal gifts almost as disruptive as our unequal disabilities; the feeling of dominance can force us apart, until even the offer of generosity can feel like common assault. Sympathy can be finely-tuned, but it is a delicate miracle, not to be achieved with the ease we might suppose in the emotional snowstorm of early love.

One wonders how many human relationships which appear too difficult are simply abandoned, because we can't believe love should be so costly. If we seek out a way that comes easier, we may well end up with a relationship where mutual exploitation is easier to disguise, where there is a more engrossing emotional drive, where the particular sorts of selfishness we each suffer from chance to interlock more easily. But relationships infallibly expose selfishness, and in the end it has to be worked through, because a relationship either goes on purifying itself, or dies. There isn't any other way. This is very difficult, but it is real, and it is what love is for.

The Mess Good relationships balance positive/negative realities with wisdom, latitude, and that affectionate forgiveness that has lost count. But we are only human, and the messiness of the situation can run us ragged. We try to protect those we love from our worst inclinations; so often they find that we have overlooked one or two that they find particularly life-denying.

I find that it is when things seem to be most messy that the voice of God can clearly be heard. When we have lost confidence in ourselves and our power to make good our losses, God speaks to us about real love, and we can then hear what he is saying almost for the first time. There is about the Cross just the awful messiness that characterizes my needs and my failures. I know, deep down, that it is the Cross that *matches* the situation, and not the rose-tinted dreams with which I first set out.

The truth is that God's love for us is a solar reality to which human relationships are lunar. Even the least conscious human being is capable of being illuminated from without, and this is what makes love so religious an experience. We are being shone upon when we love, and beyond our mistaking, something is transforming us. We *do* make mistakes, such as thinking that it is the human being we love who is the source of the light. This is the illusion that passes, and its loss has proved fatal to many a promising relationship. The experience of human love is a *catalyst*, if you like, which precipitates in us the knowledge of God. Those who fail or, worse, *refuse* to learn, are simply compelled to repeat the lesson until they do. Serial polygamy, they say, is a dreary business, and I'd believe them. (Holy celibacy may not enjoy a positive press in 1997, but it has considerable advantages over the authorized contempt which is the legacy of many failed marriages. At present two out of five English marriages fail.)

I do not believe that the understanding of God's love can come into a life that does not lie open to human love, and there is good scriptural warranty for this view. But I reckon that this openness to human love needs to be as wide as the love of God itself - the one that included all that hard stuff about *sacrifice*, etcetera. And I don't think you can *fund* such generosity from within; the books will not balance, the lesson will be too hard; we shall fall by the wayside. A disastrous failure in these areas is a very big thing. There is a potential for embitterment on the deepest level. By contrast, the solitary lessons taught by prayer, and the waiting for the love of God, actually answer the longings and the questions which human love never finds tractable; the love of God is infinite and eternal, and this is the love which we seek in vain from one another. The release of the human relationship from the impossible demands thus raised may be its salvation. This is not a plea for a lowering of the ideals, but a call for marriages to be truly Christian ones, in which the love of God is properly engaged to free the couple, and to inspire *and make possible* a truly unlimited kind of love.