

Good Friday 3rd Address: The Reality of Love in Human Relationships

When Jesus spoke to his mother and the beloved disciple from the Cross, “Woman, behold thy son: behold thy mother”, we get a glimpse of the humanity of Christ and the cost of human loving. But no word perhaps carries with it so little reality as the way in which the word “love” is constantly used and misused. And the multiplicity of nuances which this one small word has to carry seems so often to reduce it to meaninglessness. Pop songs or operatic arias, television soaps or romantic novels, teenage magazines or the popular press, all will use this word which can mean sexual attraction, lust, possessiveness, even jealousy. But is it really fair to load on to this word these often negative and destructive attributes? What do we need to discover about the reality in human relationships of the word “love”?

If we would understand love, we must first seek to know and understand ourselves. Jesus endorsed the mainstream Jewish teaching about the most important of the Commandments: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength” and “Love your neighbour as yourself”. The First Letter of John spells out for us what this means, as of course did Jesus in many of his parables: *“Those who say, ‘I love God’, and hate their brothers and sisters, are liars: for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have*

from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also."

So, "Love your neighbour as yourself", means, that if we cannot love ourselves, we shall never be able to love another, for we shall be constantly taking out on them the inadequacies we are failing to recognise in ourselves.

As a human being I am a split personality, the result of that division between the me who is made in the image of God and the me who has become alienated from God. In psychological terms there is a split between the conscious and the unconscious. My conscious mind wants health, my unconscious sickness; my conscious wants life, my unconscious has a death wish; my conscious is forgiving, willing to let go of someone, to let them live their own life, my unconscious wants to nurse resentments, to cling, to make others dependent on me. Disunity in life's relationships often begins when the unconscious takes control over the conscious, the immature over the mature. Often love becomes distorted because we have never grown up.

The psychologist Jung wrote, *"Something in me wishes to remain a child: to be either unconscious or at most conscious of the ego: to reject everything foreign or at least subject it to our will: to do nothing or else indulge our cravings for pleasure or power."* We recognise this in mothers who want their children to continue dependent on them even when adult; in spoilt people who marry and look to their partner to continue to spoil them as their mother or father did. Or else we wish to dominate our partner, as the

celebrated Mrs Proudie, the bishop's wife, in *Barchester Towers* did: "*In the determined fashion of a masterful woman she is devoted to him*" – and God help us if we become the victim of such devotion!

The neurotic tendencies within ourselves find their outlet either by taking it out on those nearest to us, or in that kind of do-gooding which has been well described as "She is the sort of woman who lives for others and you can tell the others by their hunted look". Or there is the man who refuses to come to terms with advancing years and imagines that the flattery of his younger secretary is a tribute to his 'macho' image despite his decreasing virility. Or there is the woman who spends hours in beauty parlours trying to make mutton look like lamb! To be able to live appropriately each age to its reality is very difficult.

Christ had to deal with all these human immaturities. His family at one point wanted to take him over. His disciples wanted to keep him to themselves and shield him from danger and from other people. Mary Magdalene had to be told "*Do not hold on to me*". Both Mary, his mother, and John, his closest friend, had to be taught that true love is by release and not by possession.

If knowing and loving ourselves is the first act of loving, so affirming the significance of another underlies the whole meaning of "Love your neighbour". The psychologist Erich Fromm who wrote a seminal book in the late 1950s "*The Art of Loving*" and which still today has enormous

impact and relevance, says this: *“To love is to give oneself without guarantee, to give oneself completely in the hope that our love will produce love in the loved person. Love is an act of faith, and whoever is of little faith is also of little love.”* Jesus had that kind of love and belief in those he loved. He brought out before them the full reality of their significance. Through him Mary learnt that true motherhood was to be able to give rather than demand, to be there when needed, to share suffering without bitterness or resentment of Jesus for landing her in that position. John learnt what is later expressed in that First Epistle that bears his name that *“Perfect love casts out fear”*. He too could learn to be just there and available without demand. Also in those words from the Cross Jesus draws attention to a lesson which modern civilisation in the West often forgets, that the needs of age and youth are interdependent, not in contradiction. Sometimes in our society, unlike wiser Eastern civilisations, we act as though only the demands of youth are important. But age and youth need each other, as this ageing generation will increasingly discover: Mary needs John, John needs Mary. Both find their unity in their love of Jesus and from Jesus.

Yet real love is very fragile and vulnerable. In that famous poem *“The Prophet”* Kahlil Gibran writes, *“Even as love crowns you, so shall he crucify you. Even as he is for your growth, so he is for your pruning”*.

Sometimes we seem to try to take away from Jesus his full humanity. If Jesus had no ordinary loves, no sexual feelings, no preference for one person as against another, he would have been less than human and so no

good to us. You could argue that in his earthly life Jesus loved humanly at least three people: his mother Mary; a woman, Mary Magdalene; a man, John, often called the beloved disciple. I am not going to speculate about the specific nature of these relationships – the biblical record is properly reticent here – but I think one might say that in these three relationships all human love is good and redeemable, be it for man or woman, be it same or opposite sex. For each of these conditions of relationship is patent to abuse and corruption. Also Jesus shows us that on the human spectrum of male and female, it not a matter of extreme but of balance. Jesus shows us that to be fully human we need to acknowledge and cultivate both the male and female qualities that lie within each of us.

And to love humanly means also to know the cost of love. Jesus knew that, much as he loved his mother, he had to leave family relationships for the wider world of love. He knew he could not spare his mother nor others who loved him the torture of seeing the one they loved torn from them by crucifixion. He knew that John and Mary Magdalene would find their true greatness without his human presence rather than with it: their stature would grow when he had left them. This is a lesson we must all learn and it is a painful one. To be able to let someone you love go, when you would long for them to find their fulfilment by remaining with you, is one of the sure signs of a true love.

There is also another reality of love which is selfless and generous. We find that reflected in that other Word of Jesus from the Cross, “I thirst”. The

love I mean is where there is a response yet no personal relationship between the one who needs love and the one who gives it, but the giver is sensitively responding to a situation of pain, or misery, or victimisation. This is the reality of love, because it is love knowing how to respond to those in need of love. So often people's response to those who are suffering is very negative. It's easy to adopt an attitude of blameworthiness: *"The unemployed are feckless and lazy"*. *"Those who get raped usually entice the rapist"*. *"Those who beg on the streets and outside stations are just druggies"*. *"Immigrants are just here to milk the welfare state"*. It's the sort of reaction that one can so often find endorsed or indeed whipped up by the morally self-righteous tabloid press. It is always so easy to slip into the attitude, as though misfortune were the result of a person's sin, especially if it is of a sexual nature. Not only does it make us feel good, but it establishes and backs up our belief that God runs the world according to the lights of our understanding of rewards and punishments. We feel more secure by trying to shift the blame and we bargain with God: he will be good to us if we keep the rules. But the truth is, it isn't so. All are in need of repentance without exception. None of us is without sin. None dares cast the first stone. Those who are judged most severely in the Gospels are the hypocritical, the self-righteous, the unloving and the deliberately destructive towards others.

Or our response might be to shrug off responsibility: it is "their" responsibility, the anonymous "they", the Government, the Council, the Social Services, the NHS...the Diocese! Projection is the name of the game.

There again we might be afraid, so we distance ourselves and don't want to be involved: we walk by when we see someone being attacked or bullied in the street fearful that they may turn on us or give us a mouthful of abuse; we take no notice if we hear screams of a battered child or wife next door, because we don't want any unpleasantness with the neighbours.

These are not dissimilar to reactions that Jesus himself experienced. The religious authorities stood and condemned: he had deserved it. The mob of people cried "Crucify", because that is what the manipulators of opinion wanted. Pilate refused to be involved – it was no concern of his. One of the thieves crucified with him distanced himself from Christ even in his dying. But when the cry "I thirst" came, one of the soldiers who had no connection whatever with Jesus save that of doing a distasteful duty responded and put a sponge to his lips. It was the response of those good-hearted people who offer help or accommodation when a local disaster strikes; or those who make it their business to visit and befriend those in prison; or those who respond generously and automatically write a cheque when another catastrophe or disaster causes an emergency appeal to be launched; or those who give of their time to help those young people who have been rejected and kicked out of their own homes, their school and feel utterly rejected. Frequently those who respond in this way are not members of the Church, who can often act very differently and find themselves allies with the religious authorities of Jesus' day.

But those who respond to the cries of “I thirst” are those who become voluntary pain bearers, absorbing the hurt and anger and pain of others and giving back acceptance and care. They are usually the people either who instinctively know what compassion and love in a given situation demand, or those who in a deeper way are aware of their own failures, sins and inadequacies and in their loving of the wounded, whether physically, morally or spiritually, are admitting in a creative exchange that they too are wounded.

So the reality of love is to know and love ourselves in the understanding of ourselves. Then to be able to give that significance and worth to another which I have now found in myself. And then, because love is costly and vulnerable both in personal love and in the love which responds to the cries of “I thirst”, to be able to say with the poet Gibran:

“Love has no other desire but to fulfil itself.

But if you love and must needs have desires, let these be your desires:

To know the pain of too much tenderness, to be wounded by your own understanding of love and to bleed willingly and joyfully”.

Or as one of our more recently written hymns puts it:

“I will weep when you are weeping;

when you laugh I’ll laugh with you;

I will share your joy and sorrow

till we've seen this journey through".

It is in the bearing of one another's burdens, the sharing of one another's pain, the knowing of one another more deeply that we begin to understand what Christ did for us on the Cross and he now invites us to take up our own and follow him.