

Sermon: The Love of God. Easter I 2006

The love of God comes readily to those who have most need – says Charles Sisson. Last week I mentioned that St Augustine said the best way to understand God's love for us is to think of human love, erotic love, specifically the love between husband and wife. I'd like to say a bit more about this today. Do you find the comparison even a bit shocking? Well, St Augustine's words often come as a bit of a shock. He said for example: *Love God and do as you like.*

I'm sure our difficulties arise out of our Englishness. We are reserved. And the invitation to draw near to God resembles for us the invitation to enter the headmaster's study. We easily imagine God flinging thunderbolts from the top of Mount Sinai. We can imagine obeying God – or trying to. But the love of God is too soppy, too touchy-feely for us. Embarrassing. Perhaps we can just about cope with God's love in the abstract, and see it as a sort of mechanical act of forgiveness, a cancellation of debts; a transaction. But God doesn't want us to keep his commandments because he's bossy or a control freak. God wants us to keep his commandments because they are for our good. The commandments are not abstract legal devices. They are signs of his love.

You will hear preachers say that the commandments and the law belong to the Old Testament and that love and grace belong to the New. But the Old Testament is full of examples of love, and these tell us that love is the very heart of God. My friend Michael Hyam, now departed this life and entered more closely on the love of God, could never read the meeting between Joseph and his brothers without breaking down completely: *Then Joseph could not refrain himself before all them that stood by him; and he cried, Cause every man to go out from me. And there stood no man with him while Joseph made himself known unto his brethren. And he wept aloud. And Joseph said unto his brethren, I am Joseph. Doth my father yet live? And his brethren could not answer him, for they were troubled at his presence.*

And again in the Old Testament the prophet Hosea has an unfaithful wife, but he takes her back because he loves her. Hosea says this is how it is between God and his people. At wedding interviews I try to persuade couples to choose a reading from *The Song of Songs* found in the Old Testament. They have to be brave because the love which features there is very sensual:

Behold thou art fair, my love. Behold thou art fair. Thou hast doves' eyes. Behold thou art fair, my beloved, yea, pleasant. And lo the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth: the time of the singing of birds is come. My beloved is mine and I am his. By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loveth.

Be brave then. Be very brave. For this is the love with which God loves you. This ravishing tenderness with which God wants to hold you close to him. When God wants to show us how he loves us, he shows a couple, lovers. And we come into the New Testament where we find that the church is the bride of Christ – *coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.* And that most tender adorable incident in St Luke's Gospel: *She bringeth an alabaster box of ointment, and stood at his feet behind him weeping and began to wash his feet with her tears and did wipe them with the hairs of her head, and kissed his feet.* This is the

love of God. This is how God loves us. Again it is generally believed that the couple Jesus meets on the walk to Emmaus after his resurrection were a married couple and they beseech him: *Abide with us for it is toward evening and the day is far spent.*

St Augustine compares God's love to erotic love. This is not the same as lust. Augustine knew all about lust. He knew what it was to be consumed by it: *Then came I to Carthage, burning, burning. And a cauldron of unholy lusts sang all about my ears.* And he prayed *O God make me chaste and continent – but not yet.* But he speaks of his desire for God and his language is erotic, love poetry:

And the most passionate you can feel, the all consuming passion of a teenager in the flush of romantic love – think of Cherubino and that flustered aria in *Figaro – Non so piu* – this passion that will not be denied is only a pale shadow of the passion which God has for you. And again St Augustine says beautifully: *God loves each of us as though there were only one of us.* And when he speaks of his yearning for God he says, *I have learnt to love thee late: O Beauty at once so ancient and so new.*

This is the relationship with him into which God is calling you. The Passion of Christ is passionate. Isaac Watts was obliged to tone down his great hymn which originally read *When I survey the wondrous Cross, where the young Prince of Glory died.* Creation is God's creation and creation is erotic. Creation is life. And *eros* is the love of life in God. God's life. This is why we thrill to see a fine garden – the creation of the first Adam is God's spirit moving in a garden. The Second Adam Christ appears first in a garden. Think of *Gerontius* and *in the garden secretly*. *O wisest love...*

Are you not attracted to God who makes the gardens and the stars and the diatonic scale and gives it to Bach to play with. God who makes the sunrise, the lynxes, the fauns and the snow-capped peaks? All these things that move us so are the handiwork of God. And God's life is emblazoned in them. The sensuality of the world is the created means by which God reaches for us, to touch us. Sensual love, erotic love, is the sacrament which allows us to see through it into the passion of God. The Prayer Book Marriage Service puts it beautifully: *With my body I thee worship.* The sacrament of marriage is erotic love garlanded by a vow.

We should pray and ask God to make us desire him and want him.

No one puts it better than St Augustine:

But, what do I love, when I love Thee? Not the prettiness of a body, not the graceful rhythm, not the brightness of light (that friend of these eyes), not the sweet melodies of songs in every style, not the fragrance of flowers and ointments and spices, not manna and honey, not limbs which can be grasped in fleshly embraces - these I do not love, when I love my God. Yet I do love something like a light, a voice, a fragrance, food, embrace of my inner man, wherein for my soul a light shines, and place does not encompass it, where there is a sound which times does not sweep away, where there is a fragrance which the breeze does not disperse, where there is a flavour which eating does not diminish, and where there is a clinging which satiety does not disintwine. This is what I love, when I love my God.