

*He that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? – 1 St John 4:20*

There is a lot more to this apparently simple question than meets the eye. Of course, it has a surface meaning: the visibility of my brother and the invisibility of God. But let us dig a little deeper. We *have* seen our brothers and that is precisely why we find it so hard to love them. Our brothers and sisters, neighbours and colleagues, ask things of us. They make demands. They do things we'd prefer them not to do. It's a hard task to love our brother. Notice what many people do about this: they substitute for their inability to love their awkward, bothersome brother a sort of pretended and attenuated love for things afar. Thus it is that a man will have pretensions to save Africa when he can't bring himself to work to save his village post office. How many of those political bureaucrats who aim to *abolish child poverty* can find half an hour to read to their own children? Or the bleeding heart philanthropist who loves all humankind but hasn't spoken to the woman next door for ten years.

And there is a corollary to this saying of St John: it is actually very easy to think we love God – exactly because *we have not seen him*. Because we have not seen God, or taken the trouble to discover what he's really like and what he wants of us, we make our own God in our own image and we worship that. And it turns out to be merely worshipping ourselves. Remember the story of Echo and Narcissus: the worship of one's own reflection.

But this little verse of St John stirs up even deeper difficulties for us. How can we presume to *love* God? Now I'm talking about the true God, God as revealed in the Scriptures and especially and the words and person of Our Lord Jesus Christ. This God issues commandments and promises judgement. He has said he will set some on his right hand and others on his left. He has said, for instance, *Think not that I am come to bring peace but a sword. And, No man, having put his hand to the plough and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.*

We can certainly *fear* this true God and we can learn to *respect* him. But it is surely well-nigh impossible to *love* God who exercises such awesome power and authority over us?

Well, St John who asks us what we have now seen as not at all a simple question, provides us with the answer. He says: *Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins....For God IS love...*

*God is love.* As so often, we turn to St Augustine to tell us what this means and what it involves: to the doctrine of the Trinity in which the Holy Ghost is the love with which the Son loves the Father and the Father loves the Son. The miraculous insight of St Augustine is that he sees God not as the Supreme Being, an Almighty Personality who, among all the other things that he

does, actually loves us. No – the wonder of it is that God is love *and nothing else*. God is love means love is God. So when we love – if we ever succeed in truly loving – God is in us: God is that love with which we love. St John tells us that when we love our brother we are loving God. This is not an analogy, a figure of speech. St John does not say that when we love our brother it's *as if* we're loving God. When we love our brother, we love God – because God is the love that is in our brother. The single basic truth of the Christian Faith is that everything which is, exists only because it is sustained by the love of God.

This is all very well in discussions about what theologians call *the dynamics of faith* and the philosophers refer to as *the phenomenology of being*. But now we have to move on and ask ourselves a further apparently simple question: *What do we mean by love?*

We had better say first what love is not. It is not having feelings about someone. Of course, love may give rise to feelings, but love is not those feelings: the feelings are a by-product of the love. Feelings may even make us think we love someone when those same feelings really indicate another relationship entirely. Love is not sentimentality – what D.H. Lawrence described as *working up in yourself feelings that you don't really have*. Or as the old popular song had it: *Falling in love with love is falling for make-believe*.

Unfortunately the English language uses this one word *love* to cover, as it were, if not a multitude of sins then at least a number of different meanings. The Greek language in which the Gospels were written has at least three words for *love*. There is *eros* – from which we derive erotic love. There is *philadelphia* – which is brotherly love. And then there is *agape* – which translates into Latin as *caritas* and into English as *charity*.

The one thing which all these forms of love have in common is a re-locating of the ego – putting yourself somewhere else. In the sexual act we have the explicit image of this in the very movements of the physical relationship. And the spiritual interiority of this physicality is revealed in the psychology of sex: to be blunt about it, the best sex happens when you are not concentrating on your own sensations but for those of the other.

Something similar happens in *philadelphia* – brotherly love. The best illustration I can find is among soldiers, in the regiment. Sir Brian Horrocks said:

*Many times, at Old Comrades' gatherings, some old soldier has come up to me and said, referring to one of the World Wars, "They were good times, Sir, weren't they?"*

*They were not good times at all. They were horrible times. But what these men remember and now miss was the comradeship and esprit de corps of the old Regiments.*

And in *agape*, *caritas*, *charity* we have love for the community of souls.

In all these various sorts of love, the essence is that we remove ourselves from the confines of our ego and re-locate ourselves in others. This is not Buddhism – the surrender of the self. It is the blinding discovery that it is only when you relocate yourself in others that you discover your true self. And to re-locate yourself in your neighbour, in your brother, means simply that you act in his interest and not your own. As Kierkegaard said:

*Most men are subjective towards themselves and objective towards others. The task is to be objective towards oneself and subjective towards others.*

If you keep your subjectivity within yourself, it will shrivel up and the life in you will be what the New Testament describes as *death* – a living death. If you give yourself away to others, you will find you have a greater and fuller life than ever.

The amazing thing, I could almost say the shocking and scandalous thing, about this is that it is what God does too. You might say that God chooses to have no being in himself at all except that which he pours out into us his creatures. And this is the path that God asks us to follow. Because we are creatures in time, we *are* – our very existence – is what we are at any one time. We are asked to locate that existence not in the self but in our neighbour. Or, as it might be, in our work. For when a person is fully involved in his work, that is when he may be said to *love* his work, he escapes the tyranny of the ego: *Who sweeps a room as for thy laws makes that and the action fine.*

Look, here, in one sentence of Our Blessed Lord is the whole meaning of love: *Whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it*

Jesus not only spoke those words: he embodied them, showed us what they mean, in his death and resurrection – that is in his love for us:

*...not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins....*