

We must put our trust in God's love. But what does this involve? It is not a sorrowful thing. It is not bitter or painful. God is not standing over us with a big stick. It is God's nature to desire the good of his creation. This desire on God's part is eternal and unalterable. No matter how many times you desert him, he will not forsake you. The Bible describes this promise and the relationship which it creates as Covenant. The short way of expressing this is to say that God is love and we are the objects of his love. To return to God is to return home and to be where we belong.

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. Do we 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.*

We British are really victims of our own character. So 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 sounds 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. But God doesn't want us to keep his commandments because he is 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 are reflections which tell us that love is the very heart of God. The late Michael Hyam, former Recorder of London and a Jew, could never read the meeting between Joseph and his brothers without breaking into tears:

*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.*

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 sexy:

*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.*

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.*

When St Augustine compares God's love to erotic love, he does not mean 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 even 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:

*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

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 time 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.*

There is nothing to be afraid of, nothing to deter us, nothing to delay us in turning to him. Why hold back? What are you waiting for – to be old or sick or past it? Now is the time to be ravished by the love of God. It is not a compensation for when other pleasures fade. God's love will fill you with passion and joy – if you will only let it. Did not Our Lord say,

*Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.*

*For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*



