

Again and again the English language offers brief combinations of words which are striking – one might almost say shocking. This phrase “fervent charity” when I suppose the association we know best is “as cold as charity”. Charity as something squeezed out of us. A duty we don’t delight in, redolent of Charles Dickens’ most lugubrious passages, of the workhouse and the poor law. I cannot understand why the virtue of charity is so despised. Why should it be acceptable to give aid by statute but not by kindness? In a remarkable book, the philosopher Antony Flew wrote recently. “Before the National Insurance Act of 1911 a variety of friendly societies, locally administered by their own members, gave insurance and health cover to nine million people. And there was little fraud. For those few who chose to cheat did so in the knowledge that they were defrauding not some huge and remote collective bureaucracy, but their own immediate neighbours.”

Now when you’re casting around for inspiration for a Sunday sermon, you’re willing to accept a bit of help from anywhere. I put my trust in the Epistle and Gospel for the day, The Bumper Fun Book, Viz magazine and very occasionally in such a volume as The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought. In that austere and nannying tome I found the entry for “charity” and it said, “Should Christians concentrate on aiding victims or should they also become involved in the struggle for better and more just systems in this world?” Now there are at least three things wrong with that sentence. First, what is all this presumption of a culture of “victims”? Secondly, what about the unguarded political prejudice which underlies the word “systems”? Have they forgotten Eliot’s censure of “men dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good”? And finally the facile remark “in this world”. For goodness sake, what other world do we have in which to exercise our moral prerogatives!

I fail to understand why old-fashioned charitable works attract such sneers – and especially among those who should know better: the church hierarchy. Some years ago a distinguished visiting preacher – I’d better not name him – came here to preach at the City New Year Service. There were assembled, I suppose, upwards of two hundred and fifty liverymen. The preacher, thinking to startle them all with his radical social gospel, said, “Money is important. But money isn’t everything.” And there sitting before him, listening to this guff with gentlemanly politeness and equanimity, were such as Lord Levine, Sir Brian Jenkins and our own Sir David Howard.

Afterwards, as I was escorting the distinguished preacher over to Drapers’ Hall, he asked me, “How did you think my address went down then?” I said, “I liked the Irish joke that you started with. But telling these chaps that money isn’t everything really is preaching to the converted. Those liverymen spend about 2% of their income on wining and dining and the rest of their time in tedious committees thinking of how they can give the other 98% away.” Charity.

In the end, it seems to me, what is done by fiat is never as good as what is done by friendship. And this, as the football commentator would say, is what charity is all about. In other words, charity – and the other word for it is love – is always personal. It is heartfelt. In the words of the Epistle it is fervent.

The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought – and surely we begin to detect oxymorons here – goes on to instruct us: “Of recent years, Christian moralists, Third World theologians, feminist theologians and other socially-engaged people have drawn attention to the intricate relationship

between charity and justice. They have warned against offering mere charity when what is needed is justice.”

I confess, I am mightily offended. What is “mere” about charity? When one person’s heart goes out to another – when the widow puts all the little she has into the collecting plate; when the nun replaces the old Jew in the queue for the gas chamber – is this “mere”? I suggest it is a damn sight less mere than the distant bureaucracy, with its waiting list and its sinister political bias – the system so perfect that no one will need to be good. So the Oxford Companion would prefer justice to “mere” charity would it? Let me remind you that justice means getting what you deserve. And I ask you candidly, would you like to get what you deserve? I know I wouldn’t. The whole point of the gospel of salvation is that God does not deal with us as we deserve. Or else which of us would be left with a leg to stand on?

Charity, like all virtue, is always personal. As in the touching story of Vincenzo Valdrati the 18th century Italian painter and architect who came to England in 1770 and designed the state rooms at Stowe. While at Stowe he attended a wedding and when the bridegroom failed to appear, he was so moved at the bride’s distress that he chivalrously offered himself as a substitute – and was accepted. It’s true but it sounds like a joke. All good jokes are true. Think of the headline “Father of nine fined £100 for failing to stop”. Or the psychiatrist who asked, “Did you wake up grumpy this morning?” And she answered, “No – I let him sleep.” Charity is the laughter of God.

Charity, love, covers the multitude of sins because it is the life of God himself. It is, as the world judges, no doubt a form of madness. And sometimes we see this divine madness, this kenosis and self-emptying, in an actual human being. Think of St Francis who simply gave everything away – as Chesterton said of him, “In plain fact he was ready to live on refuse: and it was no doubt something much uglier as an experience than the refined simplicity which vegetarians and water-drinkers would call the simple life.”

And where does it lead, this recklessness, this divine insanity? “St Francis meant to strike the note of collecting his clothes anyhow, like rags from a succession of dustbins. Ten years later that makeshift costume was the uniform of five thousand men; and a hundred years later in that for a pontifical panoply they laid great Dante in his grave.”

But, “The end of all things is at hand...therefore have fervent charity...” What is the meaning of that “therefore”? What has charity, love, kindness to do with the end of the world? Simply this: that the fear of disease, death, dissolution is bound up with one’s sense of self. Charity is what liberates us from ourself. In charity we seek the good of the other and as we become lost in self-forgetfulness, we lose our fear. This is what is meant when it is said that love is stronger than death. It’s foolishness of course but Oh my dears think of all the holy fools and of St Francis “the court fool of the King of Paradise.”

Finally, the apostle does not say that God is loving or charitable or kind-hearted. He says, “God IS love.” This is the ultimate truth about reality. There is nothing to overcome or go better than charity. There is no greater reality. Love is throughout all time and eternity what there really is. You want proof? Look at the wounds of Christ in the body of Francis.

Now abideth faith, hope and charity: these three. And the greatest of these is charity.
Amen.