

What is the point of all this praying and singing, all these offices and masses, these rules and disciplines? They have only one purpose. Love. To show us what love is, to teach us how to love, to turn our lives into love incarnate.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit...

Tell me the truth about love? The truth is we have rather mixed feelings about it.

On the one hand, everyone appears to agree, it is the literal core of our faith, if not of faith in *general*. The Gospels are unequivocal about it. Love is the greatest commandment. Indeed according to John, Love is Jesus' only commandment. The New Testament epistles, unsurprisingly, are full of it - the greatest of these is love, the summary of the law is love, if we say we love god and do not love are neighbour, god is love...

In fact even Christ's religious opponents were, at least occasionally, persuaded - love is better than burnt offerings says the Scribe in Mark's version of this morning's Gospel. Love, in other words, is not just the summation of the ethical commands of the Covenant, it is the fulfilment of the ritual demands of the Law.

Everybody, it seems, loves love.

Certainly religious or otherwise, we have a bit of a thing about love, nowadays. We sing about love, we write about love, we talk about love endlessly, fantasise about love continually. Some might say we idolise love...We love it. And why not? Love, as Eric Clapton sang, is lovely.

But somewhere between the love that has perpetually obsessed humankind, and the love that is being revealed in the Gospel is a distinction as tiny, and as vast, as the one that separates the eternal from the temporal. Love may add a new and precious seeing to the eye, but if it does, it is because there always more to love than *can* be seen at first sight.

And so pay any kind of attention to the things we sing about love, the things we write or say about love, or the things the Pharisees, or Israel, or many of those who have cast themselves upon the love of God in Christ actually *do* in regard to love, and it is immediately apparent that love's loveliness is only half of the story...

We might want love, but most of the time we don't want *to* love. We might love love sometimes, but no less often it seems we hate it.

Listen, for example, to John Hegley articulating this dark side of our love hate relationship with love, in his poem, "Love Cuts":

**"Love cuts
love juts
out
and you walk right in to it.
Love cuts
love comes and goes
love's a rose
first you smell the flower
then the thorn goes up your nose
Love cuts
love's very sharp
a harpoon through an easy chair
a comb of honey in your hair
just wait until the bees come home and find you just relaxing there.**

Love cuts
love's claws
evacuate that heart of yours
Love cuts, love guts the fish of what you wish
for
and leaves it
in the airing cupboard
love cuts love gives you a sweeping bow
then ploughs a furrow deep above your eyebrow.. love cuts
love curtseys
then nuts you...
where it really hurtseys.”

Tongue in cheek perhaps, but it's not very far from Cupid's darts, to Hegley's harpoon through our easy chair, and anyone who ever carved an adolescent emblem of love into a desk or a tree will tell you, the symbol of a heart pierced by an arrow is no accident.

And the truth is there is something wounding about love. It is born out of separation, and it can only exist in vulnerability. It is born out of a wound, and it is made to inflict one, and to bear one. Whether it is the wound in Adam's side from which sprang the first human love, or the wound in the side of Christ from which flowed the ultimate human love, love cuts.

And it cuts, most simply, because whilst we give love, and we long for it; we also take love without responding in kind, and we reject it. We both conform to, and continually fall short of, the greatest commandments. We all love. There is not one person alive who has not loved. And there is not one that has not failed to love. We love and we do not love.

But why is that actually? If everyone agrees love is the ultimate treasure and the key to it...If it is the thing we long for? Even if it can be a bit painful sometimes, why don't we just embrace love. Why not just “let it blossom, let it flow?”

Why, for that matter, do sermons on texts like these even exist? Why not just read the texts out. And then do what they say? They're are not complicated instructions. Love God. Love your neighbour. Love love, and live in love. Why not just agree: “let's try it at least, let's give it a go, then meet back here in...40 years and we'll see if it's worked. And if not we'll try something else.”

Why? Because we want to. And we don't want to. We do love love. We long for it. And we hate love. We fear it.

(Of course) When love knocks at the door what sort of person would not drop whatever they are doing at once and come running. And yet time and again, as Mike Mason writes, “we stubbornly refuse to open up to love, even while we crouch there at the other side of the keyhole, obscurely begging love not to leave us alone...holding the door closed and at the same time imploring love, daring him in desperate incoherence, to find some way past the very defences we have put in place.”

This sounds like just what was happening in characters like this Pharisee who could not leave Jesus alone, but could not bring themselves either to open their hearts to him. And *just what we can find* happening, despite ourselves in us.

And perhaps Jesus peculiar change of subject with that man - his sudden riddle about great David's greater son - is a clue to why we are so conflicted about love. Perhaps in drawing attention to their failure to recognise that He is God Incarnate - our Lord is pointing to the fact that the only way to fully understand the command to love, the only way love can *be commanded*, and the only way such a command can be realised, is in a recognition of the

Christ - the Incarnate presence of the God who is love right at the heart of humanity - and through him, in the work of the Spirit *changing* our human hearts from within, converting our affections.

Say and sing what you like about love, the Gospel claims but if you want to know it, and be changed by it, then it will only be through the person of Jesus, and the pattern of his life.

As the Beloved Disciple says in his first letter, “We have come to know love by this: that Jesus laid down his life for us; thus we ought to lay down our lives for others”

And *here* is the thing that causes us to hate love even as we long for it - to reject love incarnate in favour of love the unattainable ideal -

Because we instinctively know, that love is laying down our lives for another.

That love cuts. To the quick. That in order to take up love, we *must* lay down our life.

When I was a little boy my grandfather had a poodle – Chico. A yappy irritating dog, that I despised. The sworn enemy of my cat, which I loved. And Chico had a rubber bone, which he loved, a little rubber bone with a bell in it, which he loved like an infant loves its dummy, and which he wouldn't let go for anything. Except, I discovered, for a real bone. If you held up a real bone in front of Chico, a horrible confusion would spread across his doggy face. You could see him thinking. Oh. I really want that bone... But unless I drop this bone, I can't pick up that bone. And if I do drop this bone, he might grab this bone, and not give me that bone...like last time... So Chico would just stand staring at the real bone, dribbling, but unable to bring himself to let go of his fake bone. Torn...

And so we are torn. Because we long for love, but we know love must cost us everything we have, we know deep in some aching place in the side of each of us, that to love is to embark on a lifelong process of handing over absolutely everything, not just everything we hold, but everything we are.

And we know, again in Mike Mason's words, “there is no one who is not broken by this process. It is excruciating and inexorable, and no one can stand up to it. Everyone gets broken on the wheel of love, and the breaking that takes place is like nothing else under the sun...because it is not physical pain or natural disaster or the terrible evil world that is to blame, but rather it is love, love itself that breaks us. And that is the hardest thing of all to take, because that is where things really hurt. There is no hurt like the crucifying hurt that happens in the place where we love. That is the vulnerable place in all human relationships. What is on the line, always, with every person we meet, is our capacity to love and to be loved.”

For human beings to love their spouses let alone their neighbours as themselves involves a decision so staggering that it cannot really be made at all: we cannot choose it – it can only choose us, and even then it can only be grown into, consented to with ever-decreasing reluctance, chosen in tiny instalments.

It might begin with symbolic gestures – like when a married couple make their vows; or here when we our kneel or bow – momentarily laying down control, putting ourselves at the mercy of another, making ourselves vulnerable for an instant. It might be nurtured in sacrament, when we see the tokens that represent our lives brought up to the altar to watch them blessed and transformed into the life of Christ through the act of greatest love, and receive back the new life of love to take into ourselves.

But, we are always, all of us, at the same time, trying desperately to renege, however subconsciously or surreptitiously, on the choice we have already made in following Christ, always shying away from the excruciating and inexorable process.

And we are always in danger of our symbols, even our sacraments, becoming ways of preserving an ideal of love, whilst our cynicism about love, our wounded resistance to actually loving others hardens quietly within us.

Yet the pain we fear in love, the loss we are afraid of, must happen, whether we avoid it or not. We must endure ruin. Those who love, and those who do not. The difference lies in the place in which this ruin is experienced.

Where we turn away from love, the ruin happens in the place in us that is love, and this place, this glorious and mysterious and delicate capacity in us, really does receive a terrible wound, sometimes enough to impair it for life.

But where we receive love, seek it, hang on to it and see it through to its mortal finish, the ruin that occurs is not in the place of love (although it may seem to be happening there), but rather in the place, in the palace, of the ego.

It is our selfish self, our independent, 'no-one can tell me what to do', limit refusing, idolising fantasising self that is truly cut by love. It is our old self, our fallen self that hides from love, even while our soul is longing for love to find us.

It is our ego that is in danger when we love, and our soul that is in danger when we do not.

Love bids us welcome, over and over, calls us - out of egocentricity and loneliness, into the dangerous place of real interpersonal encounter. And over and over we draw back, fearful of losing our self, or that simulation of self we cling onto to for comfort... But we will lose it. One day we will be laid in a tomb, just as we were laid, if not in a manger, then in a crib. Eventually, we will lay our life down. The question is only, is always, whether we will lay it down of ourselves.

Whether we will slowly, steadily choose vulnerability. Voluntarily submit ourselves to...another person. Voluntarily submit ourselves not in some global way, not in grand gestures, but in tiny everyday decisions; not just in symbolic acts but in the domestic details of our lives.

Voluntarily submit ourselves...not to a concept, not to the elusive, glamorous something we imagined love to be, but to a solid, ordinary flesh and blood someone...

That is, always, where this life of love, this Christ life, we have been chosen by, really hurts, really cuts. But those are the wounds from which the Bride of Christ emerges, and out of which she is formed, and those are the wounds by which we are healed.

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