

Devotional Blog

Sunday 1st November

A singularly unattractive little girl lived in an orphanage. The people in charge did not like her at all and dearly hoped that some long-lost relative would come to the orphanage and claim her. One day a member of staff spotted the little girl writing a note and tucking it into the branch of a tree near the orphanage gate. The staff member reported it to the management. They were delighted. Could it be she at last be communicating with a friend or perhaps even relative. When the little girl was out of sight, they went to the tree and fished out the handwritten note and opened it. There in a child's scrawl were the words, "Whoever finds this, I love you."

Love: we all need it, and we all need to share it.

Love is the theme of a famous passage in Matthew's Gospel, Matthew 22:34-46. It covers familiar ground for us with its three-fold expression of Christian love: love of God, love of neighbour, love of self.

It's easy to forget the context of this passage. It actually comes on the Monday of Holy Week. The Sunday previous has been all about acclamation but in a few days' time we have Friday's execution. Yet in the middle of this tension, Jesus teaches about love.

A lawyer has been put forward by the Pharisees, who move in to challenge Jesus after he has silenced the Sadducees. It may be that this questioner is a professional theologian, carefully chosen to catch Jesus out in debate.

The question has the air of simplicity about it: "What of the 613 Hebrew laws is the most important?"

Jesus gives his famous two-part answer. He dips into Deuteronomy 6:5, into the Shema, the daily prayer at the heart of the Jewish faith:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul and with all your mind”.

Then he couples it with a piece from Leviticus 19:18:

“Love your neighbour as yourself”

Now, you will have heard numerous sermons on love of neighbour. Indeed, love of others is the bedrock of Christian charity and outreach.

While love of self is neither praised nor condemned but merely taken for granted, many devotional writers highlight its importance in combating low self-esteem caused by guilt or a lack of self-confidence.

But how do we respond to the first, and maybe the greatest element, of our three-fold formula for Christian love? Put other way, how do we love God?

Much of our prayerful relationship with God is based on thanksgiving, confession, or petition. We acknowledge that we bask in his love and live to share that with others. We could simply say that love of God is mysterious, but that seems to sidestep the first commandment.

Perhaps we could start our prayers by reflecting on how we love those closest to us. Parents, Grandparents, Partners, children etc. The passion in this love is a good starting point for thinking about how we should feel about God. Let's add more to this passion. Let's add how you would feel about someone who had saved your life. Yes, and a bit more: let's add the love for someone whose own death means that death is not the end for you. You see loving our God is powerful, passionate stuff.

A moments reflection like this can remind us that our love of God is the very centre of our lives, the centre of our being. It's who we are and what we are all about.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, our daily lives of serving others should not only reflect God's freely given love to us but also our love for God.

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