

LOVE:

a sermon praught by the Rev'd Dr Richard Major
to the Anglican church in Zagreb
(meeting at St Joseph's Chapel, in the Jesuit seminary of the Immaculate Heart of Mary),
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Leviticus xix^{1-2,15-18}, Psalm i, I Thessalonians ii¹⁻⁸, Matthew xxi²³⁻³².
From the Gospel:



*The second is like it:
You shall love
your neighbour
as yourself.*
In the Name
of the Father,
the Son
and the Holy Ghost:
Amen.

The Holy Gospel

WHEN THE PHARISEES heard that JESUS had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question to test Him. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “*You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.* This is the greatest and first commandment. And the second is like it: *You shall love your neighbour as yourself.* On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, JESUS asked them this question: “What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is He?” They said to him, “The son of David.” He said to them, “How is it then that David by the Spirit calls Him Lord? – saying,

*THE LORD said to my Lord,
‘Sit at My right hand,
until I put Your enemies under Your feet’.*

If David thus calls Him Lord, how can He be his son?” No one was able to give Him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask Him any more questions.

Corrado Giaquinto, *St Margaret Mary Alacoque Contemplating the Sacred Heart of Jesus* (about 1765).

THE YEAR IS HURRYING TO ITS END. Ahead of us lies Advent: the end of time, the beginning of judgement. The mood is of summing up. What really matters? What is the pith of our lives?

We are given today that great moment in the Gospels when Christ, challenged to sum up existence, did, and in a couple of sentences fixed how life should be lived. The point, it seems, is to love; everything hangs on that.

We do love, of course: our family and our friends; in a vaguer, more dilute way, our acquaintances. In a rather theoretical fashion we love our compatriots and coreligionists, those unseen mobs. Is that all? Is that enough?

No! We are to love *our neighbour*, which doesn't mean our friends or peers, but whoever happens to set down beside us, whoever is in view – everyone, in fact. And we are to love them with the sincere intensity we cherish ourselves.

Now, that sounds impossible, far away, beyond reality. And indeed it is impossible, if we think we can just *will* ourselves into universal love. Try that, and you'll merely disappoint and wreck yourselves, and in the wreckage of your heart love things will seem dreary and rancid. Most parishes house a bitter person who has found Christian love a cheat, an unwillable delusion.

But we don't have to *will* such love. We don't have to create it. It already exists, uncreated.

For the essence of God is pure love. Before the worlds began, the Father and the Son, those two persons within the One God, burned with delight in each other; and the Spirit was the vehicle of their love. God was so enraptured with God that His love overflowed: for He desired finite creatures to love as well, tiny beings who would love Him back in their littleness. The worlds sprang out of the divine love as surely as human babies spring from the love of their parents. Love is the essence of God; love is the raw material with which He made the universe.

Picture the planets. We usually imagine them floating in a black void. That's all rot. Black space does not exist. It's an optical illusion caused by staring upward. There is no blackness beyond the atmosphere of our world, only the everlasting blaze of the sun. The planets swim forever in a glory of light, like roasting chestnuts in front of a roaring fire.

But we might equally say that the worlds swim in a blaze of love. That's just as physically true. Why does anything exist? Because God made it, and sees it, and loves it. If even for an instant He ceased to look on it, it would not exist. But He does see it, and His love falls on it fierce, lustrous, golden, and life-giving as the light of the sun. Every atom is offspring of the divine love, and only God's love sustains it.

So it's nonsense to think we should *create* love, as if we were meant to mint gold coins – as if we were billionaires walking a mean street of beggars, scattering alms. How could we? The idea's impossible. No: our role is to open ourselves to the infinite, eternal love that is all about us, and let ourselves be channels of that.

God's love comes pouring into you, an ocean into a coffee cup. It comes not just because He made you and loves you as His creation. More than that: He became a Man, and called you to Himself as a Man. You answered; you are in love with Jesus Christ, Who is in love with you; it's as concrete and particular as any human relationship. This evening, in this Eucharist, you hear His

voice, speaking individually to you; and He puts His Body into your individual palm.

How can we say, then, that Christian love is an ideal far away and hard to realise? Love is the wine we drink now, the wine that makes us glad and strong forever. It is the bread we eat now, the bread that keeps us alive, forever. Love comes cascading into our lives, and we need merely to understand, and let it go cascading out, flooding the world as we move about in it.

AS THE FATHER HATH LOVED ME, so have I loved you. that's one of the most staggering statements in the Gospels, once we grasp that Christ really means the word *as*.

Christ's love of you is not an imitation, but an extension, of the love the Father has for the Son. And likewise our love of each other is not merely an imitation, but a continuation, of Christ's love for us. When Christ says *continue ye in My love*, He means precisely *love one another, as I have loved you*.^{*} When He says that the first commandment is to love God with ardour, and that the second is to love neighbours, He insists that the *second is like* the first. The two commandments don't seem alike at first glance – and there's often an apparent tension in the Church between mere contemplation, which appears to lose us in ardent love of God, and mere do-gooding and love of the neighbour. But the tension is only apparent, because the two loves are *like*. We love another because we love Christ; we love Christ because He first loved us; and that love is the overflow on the eternal love within the Trinity. Love is one, because love is the essence of God.

That's the theological idea. It sounds a bit dry, perhaps. One attempt to capture the idea devotionally has been the cult of Sacred Heart of JESUS, which means worship of the inner mind and essence of the Saviour: to His perfect unmitigated love, wounded but unconquerable. The great exponent of this devotion was St Margaret Mary Alacoque. Christ "showed me", she wrote, "that it was His great desire of being loved by men and of withdrawing them from the path of ruin that made Him form the design of manifesting His Heart to men".[†]

There are problems, of course. In our language *heart* has, alas, come to mean merely *the emotions*; so the devotion is easily misunderstood. Moreover, since the Sacred Heart has always been a *popular* devotion, a grassroots thing, it generally produces *kitsch* imagery.

But this is no place for delicacy. A bleeding heart, radiant, erupting everlasting flame, wreathed in roses: this is not subtle, because it is not meant to be subtle. It is meant as a consolation to those suffering grossly. Worship of the Sacred Heart has strengthened millions of the poor to endure with patience, courage and cheer. It assures us all that, beneath the pain of life, beneath the complexity and difficulty of Christianity, is pure love. *As the Father hath loved Me, so have I loved you.*

^{*} John xix^{5, 12}.

[†] *Revelations of Our Lord to St. Mary Margaret Alacoque.*

THIS, THEN, IS THE PITH of the Christian Faith (worth remembering as the year dwindles to a close, and as we begin to contemplate the end of all things).

God is love. God is love, and therefore loved this world of man, even when it fell from Him. God is love, and therefore became a Man. God is love, and therefore gives Himself to us as a Man, flesh to sustain our flesh, blood to cleanse our blood. God is love, and so we belong to love, and live in it and by it.

And when we hear Love tell us to love everyone, it is not an impossible command that nudges us into irony and weariness, because we cannot fulfill it. It is such an obvious thing. How could we not love the whole world? The same Spirit that bears the Father's love to the Son is inside us. How could we not love as promiscuously as God loves? We are panes of glass, keeping ourselves clear enough to let the divine lustre blaze through us, drenching the world with the love of Love Himself.

To God, then,
Father, Son and Holy Ghost,
ever Three, ever One:
be glory and honour,
now, and in the ages of ages:
Amen.

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Collect

ALmighty and everlasting God, increase in us the gifts of faith, hope, and love; and, that we may obtain what you promise, make us love what you command; through JESUS Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end:
Amen

Lesson

THE LORD SPOKE TO MOSES, saying: Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.

You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbour. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbour: I am the LORD.

You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbour, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD.

Psalm*Beatus vir qui non abiit*

HAPPY ARE THEY WHO HAVE NOT WALKED in the counsel of the wicked, nor lingered in the way of sinners, nor sat in the seats of the scornful!

Their delight is in the law of the LORD, and they meditate on His law day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither; everything they do shall prosper. It is not so with the wicked; they are like chaff which the wind blows away.

Therefore the wicked shall not stand upright when judgment comes, nor the sinner in the council of the righteous.

For the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked is doomed.

Epistle

YOU YOURSELVES KNOW, BROTHERS AND SISTERS, that our coming to you was not in vain, but though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition. For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts. As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.