

Friendship in the Spirit : soul companions

We are not meant to journey to God on our own. God is communion. We are created in the image of God who is love, and so our very existence is an expressions of love. Created by love and for love, we are meant to dwell in love. We are never meant to be alone. Jesus' longing was to bind us all together in love: 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you'(John 15:12).

We do not love others when we see them always in relation to ourselves, either as extensions of ourselves or as people who can satisfy our needs. To love others we must learn to respect them precisely as other, with their own special and sacred mystery. Simone Weil writes:

'The substance of love of neighbour is attentiveness. It is an attentive regard in which the soul empties itself of itself in order to receive in itself the being that it regards, just as it is, in all its truth.'

We must learn to respect others in their own world and not simply insofar as they relate to us. We are to be open especially to the mysterious ways in which the other person is loved by God. To love another person our heart must learn to resonate in sympathy with the movements of the other person's heart. To love is to recognise that there is a sacred mystery unfolding in our own soul, and that this is also happening in the soul of the other. To love is to go beyond this recognition and to be in communion with the other within this sacred mystery. This is true of all love of another. It is especially true of the love which we know as friendship.

Hence the warning not to confuse love with the experience of falling in love. When we fall in love we experience a partial and temporary collapse of the ego boundaries which we have developed in order to become our own person. We enjoy the feeling of falling in love because it enables us to recapture something of the limitless communion which we knew as children. Of its nature, falling in love cannot last, for true love requires an acceptance of each person's unique otherness. It can, however, lead to true love, for it attracts us to extend our ego boundaries by taking another person into communion. Lasting communion in love is not something we fall into, nor does it always come easily. It is the fruit of much real loving.

It is important also to distinguish between love and dependency. We can be tempted, in the name of love, to constrict others in such a way as to reinforce their dependence upon us. We can be tempted also, in the name of love, to try to avoid having to grow up, by depending on others in inappropriate ways. In the name of love we can be mutually reinforcing an unliberating relationship where everything is done to secure what the other person will do for me, rather than developing real love in which we dare the journey of maturing as people and offer ourselves to each other in a mutually liberating self-offering. To love another person we must want that person's spiritual growth and be ready to sacrifice anything, however attractive and desirable, which is an obstacle to that growth.

To love others we need to be able to turn our attention away from ourselves and our own needs and direct our attention to them. We can do this only to the extent that we have a healthy self-respect and love of ourselves. Did not Jesus say that we are to love our neighbour as we love ourselves (Mark 12:31 = Leviticus 19:16)? To the extent that we do not respect or love ourselves we necessarily experience disturbance. A pool that is disturbed cannot reflect clearly. Only to the extent that we have learned to love ourselves as God loves us can we calmly turn our attention away from our own needs and look at the other as other.

The goal is to love ourselves the way God loves us. God knows us intimately and loves us unconditionally. We have already reflected on God's love at some length. Let us here recall the wonderful truth that the Ultimate Reality, the One in whose Being we all share, is Love. Let us do this by listening to the Psalmist telling us that God loves us with the feelings of love which a

mother has for the child in her womb. The texts speak of God's 'mercy' or 'compassion', words used to translate the Hebrew *rhm*, which is related to the word for womb:

'Be mindful of your *mercy*, O Lord, and of your steadfast love'(Psalm 25:6).

'Do not, O Lord, withhold your *mercy* from me; let your steadfast love and your faithfulness keep me safe forever'(Psalm 40:11).

'Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant *mercy* blot out my transgressions'(Psalm 51:1).

'According to your abundant *mercy*, turn to me'(Psalm 69:16).

'Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his *compassion*?'(Psalm 77:9).

'Let your *compassion* come speedily to meet us, for we are brought very low'(Psalm 79:8).

'The Lord crowns you with steadfast love and *mercy*'(Psalm 103:4).

'As a father has *compassion* for his children, so the Lord has *compassion* for those who fear him'(Psalm 103:13).

'Gracious is the Lord, and righteous; our God is *merciful*'(Psalm 116:5).

'Let your *mercy* come to me, that I may live; for your law is my delight'(Psalm 119:77).

'Great is your *mercy*, O Lord; give me life according to your justice'(Psalm 119:156).

'The Lord is gracious and *merciful* ... and his *compassion* is over all that he has made.'
(Psalm 145:8-9).

Inside each of us is a child who has been hurt and who needs nurturing. To love ourselves we have to learn to love the child within with the same mercy and compassion which God has for us. If our love for ourselves is to be real, we must love ourselves as we really are. There is a lot to consider here, including our owning of the sinful ways in which we have failed to be the person whom God has graced us to be. But, before focusing on our real or apparent failures, we must realise that the most profound truth about ourselves is that we are creatures of God, and that life is something which we receive moment by moment as a gift. We cannot give ourselves life. If our love for ourselves is to be real, we will have to learn to resist the desires and aspirations that resist grace and so distort who we are. However, it is even more important to recognise and nurture those desires and aspirations that respond to grace. The person we become depends on our openness to the creative grace coming to us from the Heart of God.

This dependence on God does not mean that we are *lost* in God, somehow vanishing into the divinity. On the contrary, God wants us to *find* ourselves in Him in our own unique being. We lose ourselves when we fail to open ourselves to God's creative love, when we fail to love ourselves as God loves us. This means loving all of ourselves, including our shadow side, while doing what we can to respond to grace and resist sin. Julian of Norwich writes:

'Christ wishes us to be like him in undiminished, everlasting love towards ourselves and our fellow Christians. He does not withdraw his love from us because we sin and he does not wish us to withdraw love from ourselves or from others because of sin. We must unreservedly hate sin and at the same time endlessly love the soul as God loves it. We should hate sin just as God hates it, and love the soul as God loves it'(Showings, chapter 40).

We can be helped to love ourselves by the love which we receive from others. For this love to be real, however, it is essential that those who love us know us as we really are, for otherwise we know that they are loving only the mask which we are presenting to them. When that happens we know that what we are being offered, however well intentioned, is not genuine love. It is something we have engineered. In any case, unless others have their own reasons for living in a

world of make-believe, they soon see through our masks. We have to learn to resist the temptation to want to make ourselves appear attractive so as to be admired, liked and wanted. It is not how we appear that ultimately matters; it is who we are.

If we are going to find our true selves and experience and enjoy true loving, we have to climb out of the cradle where we see everything in terms of gratifying our own perceived needs. Such behaviour is selfish, for we are opting to maintain our present level of 'security' and indulge our felt needs rather than risk the giving of the true self and the receiving of another when love beckons us to do so. We need to become aware of the ways in which we do things, motivated by our desire for a return. God, who is love, is gracing us in and through every experience to learn to share in his love which is unconditional. Such a love is the fruit of grace. We cannot make it happen, but we can honestly admit the limits of our loving and we can long that our 'hidden self may become strong'(Ephesians 3:16), and that gradually we may learn to respond to God's grace which is drawing us towards love because it is drawing us towards God.

If we are going to learn to love our real selves, we have to respect ourselves (from Latin *respicere*, to look and look again). It is important to know myself now as I am now – as I really am. Not as I would like to be. Not as others expect me to be. Not as I want others to see me. We have to find courage (from Latin *cor*, meaning 'heart'), for we will have to let a lot go, if we are going to extend and transcend ourselves against the resistance of fear. If we are going to learn to love our real selves, we must have compassion on ourselves (from Latin *cum + passio*, feeling or suffering with). We must learn how to console and comfort ourselves (from Latin, *cum + solus*, meaning to stay with ourselves when we are alone; and the Latin, *cum + fort*, being strong with). If we are honest with significant others and they do offer support, let us thank God; but we all know the folly of expecting others to provide the consolation and comfort that can only come from within.

If we are going to learn to love our real selves, we must be true with ourselves (Note the related words 'be-troth-al' and 'trust'). We must be faithful to our true selves (Note the related words 'confide', 'bide', 'fidelity'). We must be devoted to our own true good (from Latin *devotio*, consecrated, 'vowed', to God). We must be serving our own true good (Note the related words 'observing', 'conserving', 'preserving'). To love is to recognise oneself as being, like God, able to 'create', to 'enliven'(put life into), to 'encourage'(put heart into), to 'enjoy'(put joy into).

In his book *Anam Çara: spiritual wisdom from the Celtic world*, John O'Donohue writes:

'May you recognise in your life the presence, power and light of your soul.

May you realise that you are never alone, that your soul in its brightness and belonging connects you immediately with the rhythm of the universe.

May you have respect for your own individuality and difference.

May you realise that the shape of your soul is unique, that you have a special destiny here, that behind the façade of your life there is something beautiful, good and eternal happening.

May you learn to see your self with the same delight, pride and expectation with which God sees you in every moment'(page 161).

Jesus said: 'If you want to become my follower, deny your self and take up your cross daily and follow me. For if you want to save your life you will lose it, but if you lose your life because of me you will save it. What does it profit you to gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit your self?'(Luke 9:23-25). We speak of self-sacrifice, a term that is capable of a rich, positive meaning, but one which can also be terribly misunderstood. 'Sacrifice' comes from two Latin words, *sacer* meaning 'holy' and *facere* meaning 'to make'. To sacrifice means to 'make holy'. True self-sacrifice is based on the realisation that only God can make holy. To be self-sacrificing (in the best sense) means to offer ourselves to God, opening ourselves to God's sanctifying action. It means allowing Christ to live in us and to draw us into communion with God even when

this involves allowing much of what we perceive as the self to be diminished. It means to offer our real selves up to God allowing God to unite us to Himself and so to bring us to enjoy holiness. It means to offer ourselves, our true selves, to others in love, knowing that this love which has its origins in God will make them holy too.

We have to face the trials of life, trusting that grace is always present. However unjust a trial may be, God is there and his love can make of the trial an occasion for our purification. (Note that the words ‘fire’ and ‘purge’ derive from the same root as ‘purify’). This is God’s work, so if we are to learn to love ourselves and so be free to love others, we must abandon ourselves confidently into God’s hands. John of the Cross writes:

‘God is carrying me. Although I am walking at God’s pace, I do not feel this pace ... the senses do not attain to what God effects in the soul at this time. ... A soul, then, should abandon itself into God’s hands and not its own’ (*Living Flame*, 3.67).

There is also a negative and generally destructive kind of ‘self-sacrifice’ where we do real harm to our true selves (and to others) in the name of being loving to others. True love for others will always be a gift of the real self to another, not a destroying of the self. Sometimes in the name of being ‘self-sacrificing’ we are really indulging our false self by trying to keep up an image. This happens when, for example, we fail to confront because we want to maintain the image of being an ‘understanding’ or ‘compassionate’ person. Another example is when we indulge another person without regard to the truth or to the other person’s genuine spiritual good. Such indulging is destructive, for we are, often unwittingly, reinforcing the other person’s dependence on us so as to indulge our own need to be needed. We think we are being loving, but it is the feeling of being loving that we are seeking, and not the genuine good of the other person. Paul gives us the key here when he tells us to ‘do the truth in love’ (Ephesians 4:15). Since God is love nothing is true unless it is loving. But since God is truth, nothing is loving if it is not true. Jesus said that the ‘truth will set you free’ (John 8:32). If we are not genuinely searching for the truth, we can easily deceive ourselves that something is loving when it is really a soft way of avoiding the truth.

Genuine love is self-replenishing activity. Indeed, it is even more; it enlarges rather than diminishes the self; it fills the self, rather than depleting it. It is self-fulfilling because it takes us to deeper levels of self-transcendence. This is especially true of the precious gift of love which we call friendship.

Immediately after telling his disciples that they were to love one another as he loves them, Jesus spoke of them as his ‘friends’ (John 15:15). We can learn something about the importance of friendship from the following encounter between Jesus and Peter in which Jesus speaks about faithful commitment, but in the end accepts Peter’s friendship as a basis for trust. The impetuous Peter declared: ‘Even though all become deserters, I will not’ (Mark 14:29). When the time came, his courage failed and he denied Jesus, not once, not twice, but persistently (‘three times’). John has this beautiful scene by the lake side (John 21:15-17). Referring back to Peter’s boast, the risen Jesus says to him: ‘Simon son of John, do you love me *more than these?*’ The word he uses for love [*agapân*] means: ‘Are you committed to me? Will you be faithful to the covenant love we have?’ Peter knows he can be fickle; he knows, too, that he is no better than the others. He responds: ‘Yes, Lord, you know that I love you’. However, for love he does not use *agapân*, but rather *philein*. He makes no claim to being faithful, for he knows he can fail. Rather, he assures Jesus that he is his friend, that he feels for him and cares about him, that his heart is deeply attached to him, that he is fond of him. Jesus’ response is immediate: ‘Feed my lambs’. He is commissioning Peter his friend to go and share love with those who are hungry for it.

Jesus repeats his opening question, though now he drops out all reference to the others: ‘Simon son of John, do you love me [*agapân*]?’ He is asking Peter again about his commitment.

Once again Peter cannot say yes. He knows his weakness. He can, however, reaffirm his friendship [*philein*]. And, once again, Jesus says: 'Tend my sheep'. Jesus' third question is different. He no longer speaks of commitment and fidelity. Rather he takes Peter's own word for love [*philein*] and asks Peter if he really is his friend. Does he really care about Jesus? Is he truly fond of him? Peter's hurt is a healing one. Jesus is allowing him to make up for the three-fold denial. With a humble, repentant spirit, he declares: 'Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you'. This is enough for Jesus who, for a third time, commissions Peter to share this love, this friendship with others.

In his book entitled *The Prophet*, Kahlil Gibran writes of friendship:

'Your friend is your needs answered.
He is your field which you sow with love and reap with thanksgiving.
He is your board and your fireside,
for you come to him with your hunger, and you seek him for peace.
When your friend speaks his mind, you fear not the Nay in your own mind,
nor do you withhold the Aye.
And when he is silent, your heart ceases not to listen to his heart.
For without words, in friendship, all thoughts, all desires, all expectations,
are born and shared, with joy that is unclaimed.
When you part from your friend you grieve not;
for that which you love most in him may be clearer in his absence,
as the mountain to the climber is clearer from the plain.
And let there be no purpose in friendship save the deepening of the spirit,
for love that seeks aught but the disclosure of its own mystery is not love,
but a net cast forth; and only the unprofitable is caught.
And let your best be for your friend.
If he must know the ebb of your tide, let him know its flood also.
For what is your friend that you should seek him with hours to kill?
Seek him always with hours to live.
For it is his to fill your need, but not your emptiness.
And in the sweetness of friendship let there be laughter, and sharing of pleasures.
For in the dew of little things the heart finds its morning and is refreshed.'

Henri Nouwen writes:

'When we honestly ask ourselves which persons in our lives mean the most to us, we often find that it is those who instead of giving much advice, solutions or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a gentle and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing, and face with us the reality of our powerlessness.'

We are to learn to be free to give according to our friend's capacity to receive and to receive according to our friend's capacity to give. Of course we will be hurt and we must not pretend we are not. We need to learn to take the hurt to our heart and to be gentle with ourselves, trusting the healing power of our heart, for our heart is greater than our wounds. And we must be ready to forgive and to allow the healing that is in our heart to flow out to our friend.

It is a great blessing to be able to share our journey in that special kind of friendship which flows from communion with God and which engages the spirit of those who share in this special love. Teresa of Avila had a great capacity for friendship. She wrote to a friend:

‘I assure you that if you love me dearly I return your love and I like you to tell me of yours. How unmistakable a trait of our nature is this wish for our love to be returned! It cannot be wrong, for our Lord wishes it too’.

She recognised that, especially in the early stages of prayer when we can be plagued by distractions and aridity in prayer, we need help and companionship on the journey:

‘It is a dreadful thing to be beset by so many dangers and to be alone ... For this reason I would advise those who practise prayer, especially at first, to cultivate the friendship and company of others of similar interest ... Since people find comfort in the conversation and human sympathy of ordinary friendships even when these are not of the best kind, I do not know why those who are beginning to love and serve God in earnest should not be allowed to discuss their joys and trials with others - and people who practise prayer have plenty of both’ (*Life* 7.20).

Aelred, a twelfth century English Cistercian, in a treatise on Spiritual Friendship writes:

‘Those who say that one should live perfectly detached - un comforted, unbothered, loving so little that one takes no pleasure in another’s good, so little loved that one’s bad behaviour leaves behind no scars – such are not men at all.’

In a spiritual friendship there is a harmony of all the vital energies engaged in mutual love - a harmony directed by grace. If our feelings are deeply engaged over things that are of little importance, or if our so-called friendship excludes others and leads us to cut them out of ordinary respect and love, we are not dealing with spiritual friendship. If, on the other hand, the mutual love draws us out to others and into a deeper prayer, these are signs that the friendship is indeed a grace. Therese of Lisieux wrote out the following words of Saint John of the Cross and kept them in her missal: ‘The more you remember your friend, the more you remember the love of God and the greater your desire to love him’ (*Dark Night*, I.4.7).

A number of Jesus’ first followers were disciples of John the Baptist. Yet when Jesus came near, John was happy to watch his friends leave him and join Jesus:

‘He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled’ (John 3:29).

Speaking of those who are committed to prayer and are growing in love for God, Teresa writes:

‘Do you think such persons will love and delight in no one save God? No; they will love others much more than they did, with a more genuine love, with greater passion and with a love which brings more profit. That is what love really is ... If they love anyone they immediately look right beyond the body, fix their eyes on the soul and see what there is to be loved in that. If there is nothing, but they see any suggestion or inclination which shows them that if they dig deep they will find gold within this mine, they think nothing of the labour of digging since they have love. There is nothing which suggests itself to them which they will not willingly do for the good of that soul since they desire their love for that person to be lasting, and they know quite well that is impossible unless the loved one has certain good qualities and a great love for God ... This love is like that which was borne for us by the good Lover, Jesus ...

The heart of such friends does not allow them to practise duplicity: if they see their friend straying from the road, or committing any faults, they will speak to their friend about it; they cannot allow themselves to do anything else ... ‘Happy the souls that are loved by such as these! Happy the day on which they came to know them! O my Lord, will You not grant me the favour of giving me many who have such love for me? ... Love such persons as

much as you like. There can be very few of them, but none the less it is the Lord's will that their goodness should be known. When one of you is striving after perfection, you will at once be told that you have no need to know such people – that it is enough for you to have God. But to get to know God's friends is a very good way of having Him; as I have discovered by experience, it is most helpful ... It is this kind of love which I should like us to have. At first it may not be perfect, but the Lord will make it increasingly so. At first it may be mingled with emotion, but this, as a rule, will do no harm. It is sometimes good and necessary for us to show emotion in our love'(*The Way of Perfection* 6.7 - 7.5).

In his book *The Awakened Heart*, Gerald May writes:

'The heart yearns, in simple, silent, pleading, for action that does not mimic love but springs forth from it ... My single desire for God will be of more help to my friends because my single desire for God will birth the kind of action that will really help them. It is not desiring God instead of doing helpful actions, but desiring God as the source of the actions that are going to be really helpful. It is that simple: put efficiency first, and the world gets to be the way it is today; put love first, and the whole meaning of efficiency is transformed'(page 234).

'If we give ourselves more space between feeling and response, and enter that space in a consecrated way, we will find ourselves empowered for whatever response love calls for. I am sure of it. The power then is not just ours; it is the nuclear fusion of divine grace and our dignified willingness ... Authentic loving responsiveness invites us to turn our consciousness toward the exact point where our hearts are already looking: to the source of love. There, and only there, is the wellspring of authentic responsiveness found'(page 240).

'Find your heart as best you can, follow it towards the source of love as much as possible, consecrate yourself, and trust. God's grace is present, God's love is irrevocable, and you can trust it and trust yourself within it. There are no exceptions. There are no places inside you or in the whole of creation where God's love does not exist. It is alive in prisons and hospital wards, in earthquakes and hurricanes, in your own selfishness and addictions. It is always crying out to your heart, and your heart is awake, responding. Seek it and trust it'(page 244).

In his book *The Inner Voice of Love*, Henri Nouwen writes:

'When you 'love' someone or 'miss' someone, you experience an inner pain. Bit by bit you have to discover the nature of this pain. When your deepest self is connected with the deepest self of another, that person's absence may be painful, but it will lead you to a profound communion with the person, because loving each other is loving in God. When the place where God dwells in you is intimately connected with the place where God dwells in the other, the absence of the other person is not destructive. On the contrary, it will challenge you to enter more deeply into communion with God, the source of all unity and communion among people. It is also possible on the other hand that the pain of absence will show you that you are out of touch with your own deeper self. You need the other to experience inner wholeness, to have a sense of well-being. You have become emotionally dependent on the other and sink into depression because of his or her absence. It feels as if the other has taken away a part of you that you cannot live without. Then the pain of absence reveals a certain lack of trust in God's love. But God is enough for you. True love between two human beings puts you more in touch with your deepest self. It is a love *in* God. The pain you experience from the death or absence of the person you love, then, always calls you to a deeper knowledge of God's love. God's love is all the love you need, and it reveals to you the love of God in the other. So the God in you can speak to the God in the other. This is deep speaking to deep, a mutuality in the heart of God who embraces both

of you. Death or absence does not end or even diminish the love of God that brought you to the other person. It calls you to take a new step into the mystery of God's inexhaustible love. This process is painful, very painful, because the other person has been a true revelation of God's love for you. But the more you are stripped of the God-given support of people, the more you are called to love God for God's sake. This is an awesome and even dreadful love, but it is the love that offers eternal life'(pages 53-54).