

## CHAPTER FIVE: JESUS' LOVE

Since everything Jesus is, everything he says, and everything he does, flows from his union with God, and since Jesus knows God as Love (I am using the word 'know' in its biblical meaning of knowing through intimate communion), it is Jesus' love that most characterizes him. He wants us to welcome his love, which gives us the space to find ourselves as loved and to trust the mystical experiences that love engenders in us. In giving us his Spirit, Jesus is giving us his love. It is this gift that we share with others. He does not invite us to love like him. He invites us to find our own unique way of experiencing and sharing God's love, and that we might do this he invites us to share his divinity, his communion with God.

The Beloved Disciple speaks of Jesus as being 'in the bosom of the Father' (John 1:18). Peter states: 'We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God' (John 6:69). Jesus says: 'The Father knows me, and I know the Father ... The Father loves me' (John 10:15,17). 'I know Him' (John 7:29). 'The Father loves the Son' (John 3:35; 5:20). 'I am in the Father and the Father is in me' (John 14:10). 'The Father is with me' (John 16:32). 'The Father and I are one' (John 10:30). 'I live because of the Father' (John 6:57). 'The Father is in me and I am in the Father' (John 10:38).

It is Jesus' intimate communion with God that flows out in love to people. John the Baptist speaks of Jesus as the 'bridegroom' (John 3:29). Jesus is the one who 'gives the Spirit without measure' (John 3:38). 'I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you' (John 14:20). 'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love' (John 15:9).

Let us journey through Jesus' ministry, focusing on his love. In loving people the way he did, Jesus gave meaning to their lives, and at the deepest level of their religious experience. For his love is a revelation of God and invites to communion with God.

\* Jesus attracts disciples to live and journey with him (Mark 1:16-20; Matthew 4:18-22; Luke 5:1-11; John 1:37-46). Mark and Matthew mention that two pairs of brothers, Simon and Andrew, James and John, accepted Jesus' invitation to leave their fishing trade and accompany him. Luke reflects on Jesus' invitation to Simon. Later Thomas joins them (Mark 2:14; Matthew 9:9; Luke 5:27-28). In the Gospel of the Beloved Disciple we hear that Andrew and a companion (is this companion the Beloved Disciple?) spend the afternoon with Jesus and are so impressed that Andrew goes to his brother Simon, and tells him he has just met the Messiah, the one whom God promised to send to fulfil the hopes and longings of Israel. The next day Jesus goes to Galilee and invites Philip to follow him. Philip then invites Nathanael. We are left to ponder what it was about Jesus that attracted them.

\* Jesus' heart goes out to a poor psychically disturbed man in the synagogue (Mark 1:23-26; Luke 4:33-35). It was Jesus' teaching about God (which came to be called the 'good news') that penetrated the darkness of the man's psyche. It was Jesus' love that invited the man to believe that God was loving him into life.

\* Simon's mother-in-law is able to offer hospitality to Jesus (Mark 1:29-31; Matthew 8:14-15; Luke 4:38-39). She would have heard Simon speak of Jesus. We can imagine how much she was looking forward to meeting him and offering him hospitality, and the disappointment of

succumbing to a fever. 'Jesus came, took her by the hand and lifted her up.' How gentle must have been that touch and the healing love that gave her the strength to look after Simon and his companions, and their new friend Jesus.

\* Jesus' healing love (Mark 1:34; Matthew 8:16-17; Luke 4:40). 'Jesus cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons.' Matthew adds a reference to Isaiah 53:4: 'He took our infirmities and bore our diseases.' People kept bringing the sick to Jesus, for they could feel his empathy, his willingness to share the pain of the sick and their carers. Luke adds: 'He laid his hands on each of them and cured them.' They felt that his touch was personal to 'each of them'. This was central to his mission. He wants each person to know God's personal love. It was Jesus' love and his conviction that God wants people to 'live to the full' (John 10:10) that attracted people to believe in the God whom Jesus revealed and to open their hearts to God's love.

\* Jesus' love for a 'leper' (Mark 1:40-45; Matthew 8:1-4; Luke 5:12-14). I have put the word 'leper' in inverted commas. We do not have enough evidence for an accurate medical diagnosis. He had some form of virulent skin complaint. Whatever it was it was understood that it was God's will that a person suffering such a complaint had to live outside the community (see Leviticus 13:45-46). They were afraid, for the discoloration of the skin brought them face to face with death. There was something about Jesus that encouraged this man to ignore this regulation, to dare people's rejection, and to approach Jesus: 'If you want you can make me clean.' Some early manuscripts say that Jesus was 'moved with anger' – presumably at the way people were taught to think that God would want to reject this man. Other manuscripts speak of Jesus being 'moved with compassion'. Leprosy made a person an outsider. Jesus was already having to face rejection, so he knew what it felt like to be an outsider. His response to the man is beautiful: 'Jesus stretched out his hand, touched the man and said: Of course I want to. Be made clean.' To make sure that the man was accepted back into the community, and to his family, Jesus told him to go to the priests whose task it was to judge that he was indeed healed.

\* A paralyzed man is healed (Mark 2:1-12; Matthew 9:1-8; Luke 5:17-26). Four men bring a friend suffering from paralysis to Jesus. Jesus, as ever, sees to the heart. There is something special about this man's paralysis. His inability to move physically is a symptom of his inability to take steps in his life to renew his relationship with God. It is the man's trust and the obvious love of his friends that invite Jesus to look below the surface to the source of the paralysis. Jesus never judges us in our sin. He seeks to love us out of it. Jesus wants to help the man find a way to turn from the sin that is paralyzing him. When the paralyzed man makes space for God to share with him his Spirit, he is free to walk.

\* Jesus eats with sinners (Mark 2:15-17; Matthew 9:10-13; Luke 5:29-32). It was the 'sinners' – those who were considered outside the religious community, those forbidden to join the community in the temple or synagogue – who were more open to listen to what Jesus had to say about God. It was the sinners who responded to the good news that God is Love and will never exclude them. Jesus was open to everyone, but it was the 'sinners' who were more open to welcome him. They knew they needed love and they could tell that Jesus, far from rejecting them, loved their company. It was this that opened the way for them to believe they were loved by God.

\* Filled with compassion Jesus invites us all: 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light' (Matthew 11:28-30). No one is meant to be alone. People felt that Jesus was prepared to carry their burdens with them. This led them to reflect on their own experience and to discover the strength to continue their journey, however difficult, in love.

\* A man with a withered hand is healed (Mark 3:1-6; Matthew 12:9-14; Luke 6:6-11). Once again we are in the synagogue and it is the Sabbath. There is a man present whose hand is withered. The Pharisees are watching Jesus closely. When the encounter between Jesus and the man leads to a healing, the Pharisees conspire with the followers of Herod 'to destroy him.' They judged Jesus to be thwarting God's revealed will. Jesus wants to free us from being locked into our human traditions: 'for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God' (Matthew 15:6). Love must always trump human traditions.

\* Jesus and a woman sinner (Luke 7:36-60). Jesus is sitting at table in the house of a Pharisee called Simon. 'A woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment.' We can only guess at what experiences have led her to this action. She must have witnessed his words about God and his obvious love and felt impelled to seek him out. Simon and the others at table are astonished that Jesus accepts her behaviour: 'If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him – that she is a sinner.' In fact, Jesus is the only person there who does know her, because he sees her love. He does not deny her 'many sins', but he knows that God is love and that where we find love, there we find God. He assures her that her sins must have been forgiven or she could not love so much. Overwhelmed by Jesus' loving response she finds the peace she is seeking.

\* Jesus does not condemn a woman caught in the act of adultery (John 8:3-11). The law, understood as an expression of God's will, is clear: the woman is to be stoned (see Leviticus 20:10). They ask Jesus what they should do with her. If he says they should let her go, they can accuse him of failing to follow God's law. If he says they should stone her, they will have exposed him as a hypocrite. Jesus challenges them: 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.' Afraid to face Jesus' penetrating gaze, they slink off, leaving the woman alone with Jesus who assures her that he does not condemn her. He pleads with her not to sin again. The woman, like all of us, is seeking love. Jesus knows that the only way to help her find it is not to condemn her but to offer her love, true love that flows from communion with God and invites us to embrace that communion.

\* A deranged man finds peace with Jesus (Mark 5:1-20; Matthew 8:28-34; Luke 8:26-39). He dwells among the tombs, howling and bruising himself with stones. The people had tried to shackle him, but he broke the chains. 'No one had the strength to subdue him.' When he sees Jesus he has a strange feeling: he feels love. He rushes to Jesus. The people are amazed to see him there with Jesus 'clothed and in his right mind'. Such is the power of love in one as pure as Jesus.

\* A girl is restored to life (Mark 5:22, 40-43; Matthew 9:18, 25; Luke 8:41-42, 54-56). A leader of the synagogue pleads with Jesus to restore his twelve-year-old daughter to life. Jesus takes her by the hand and says to her, “Talitha cum” (“Little girl, rise up!”). The scenes recorded in the gospels are there for their symbolic power. Here we see that Jesus love is inviting us to share with him his resurrected life. Death does not have the final word. As we read in the Song of Songs 6:6: ‘Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame.’

\* Jesus’ compassion (Mark 6:34; Matthew 14:14 and 9:36). ‘Jesus saw the crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.’ It is typical of Mark to focus on Jesus’ teaching (Matthew focuses on healing). The people were like sheep without a shepherd because so often the teaching they received about God, and so about life, obscured God’s love. This focus on compassion finds expression in two of Jesus’ best-known parables.

In the first parable (Luke 10:30-35) Jesus tells a story of a man who is robbed and left half dead on the road from Jerusalem down to Jericho. A priest is riding by, sees him and passes by on the other side. A Levite is walking along the same road and does the same. Then comes a Samaritan. The difference is that when the Samaritan sees the man he is ‘moved with compassion’, so he pours oil and wine on the man’s wounds (something the Levite could have done), then puts him on his animal and takes him to an inn (something the priest could have done). At the inn he pays the innkeeper to look after him (reversing the violence of the brigands).

The second parable (Luke 15:11-32) is about a man who has two sons. The younger one lives a wasteful life. Then for purely selfish reasons he decides to return to his father’s farm, hoping to get a job as a hired worker. ‘So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ The boy had planned to ask to be a hired servant. Overwhelmed by the father’s compassion, he now wants to be a son. There is no condemnation from the father, only love. ‘The father said to his slaves: ‘Quickly, bring out a robe – the best one – and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found! And they began to celebrate.’

The focus of the parable moves to the elder son who has dutifully stayed home and worked the farm. When he finds out that the father has welcomed the boy home he is angry, and refuses to join the celebration even though the father pleads with him: ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’ Jesus pleads with us: ‘Be merciful just as your Father is merciful’ (Luke 6:36). The father in this parable offers us a beautiful picture of God as Jesus knew God to be: a God of compassion whose delight is to celebrate life with us, whatever our situation.

\* 'I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for my sheep' (John 10:14). Jesus gives himself to us in love, Inviting us to see the whole universe and ourselves as God's Self-gift in love.

\* 'He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smouldering wick' (Matthew 12:20).

\* Jesus learns through the love and faith of a woman from Tyre who pleads with him to heal her daughter (Mark 7:24-30; Matthew 15:21-28). Jesus was always responsive to God's call. In Matthew's version Jesus understands that his Father's will is for him to minister to Israelites. Through this woman's obvious love and persistent trust in God, Jesus comes to see that God is calling him to reveal God also to the Gentiles.

\* An epileptic boy finds healing (Mark 9:14-29; Matthew 17:14-20; Luke 9:37-43). A distraught father brings his tortured boy to Jesus and describes the boy's convulsions. Jesus says to him: 'All things can be done for the one who believes'. The father responds: 'I believe; help my unbelief.' Then Jesus takes the boy by the hand and lifts him up, and he is able to stand. When the disciples ask Jesus why they were unable to help, Jesus tells them of the importance of prayer. Jesus draws his love from his communion with his Father. It must be the same for us.

\* Jesus looks on a man with love (Mark 10:17-22; Matthew 19:16-26; Luke 18:18-28). We have been watching scenes from Jesus' life. We have been observing the effects on people of Jesus' love. Mark draws our attention to a man who is rich but who knows there must be more to life than possessions. He cannot help noticing the deep communion that exists between Jesus and his disciples, and he wants to know what he has to do to share it. Jesus refers him to God's commandments. The man assures Jesus: 'I have kept all these from my youth.' Then 'Jesus, looking at him, loved him.' He invites him to unclutter his life by sharing his possessions with the poor, then 'come, follow me.' Tragically 'the man went away grieving.' In the depths of his soul he knew what he wanted, and he knew that he would find it by joining Jesus' disciples, but he was not ready to leave the life to which he had become accustomed. Imagine the sadness of Jesus when the man walked off. Jesus loves me and offers me the challenge to let go of whatever it is that is holding me back from following my deepest longings. What is my response?

\* A blind man has his sight restored (Mark 10:46-52; Matthew 20:29-34; Luke 18:35-43). A blind beggar is sitting by the side of the road. He is told that Jesus is passing that way, and persistently cries out for mercy. Jesus hears his cry and arranges for people to bring the man to him. With profound respect Jesus asks him: 'What do you want me to do for you?' Encouraged by Jesus' love the man asks to see again. Jesus assures him: 'Your faith has made you well.' The man sees. Such is Jesus' attraction that he 'followed Jesus on the way'. The gospel-writers see this man as symbolic of a disciple. Having been 'enlightened', we are all called to follow Jesus to Jerusalem, to Calvary, and to the Resurrection.

\* At the Last Supper (Mark 14:22-24; Matthew 26:26-28; Luke 22:19-20) Jesus promises to be with his disciples after his death: 'I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am there you may be also' (John 14:3). Every time we come together and eat the Eucharistic bread he will give himself to us in love to nourish us. Every time we come together to drink the Eucharistic wine he will pour into our thirsty hearts his life that is about to be poured from his heart on Calvary.

\* Jesus looks at Peter (Luke 22:61). We have already reflected on the love that is communicated by Jesus' look. Here we see it again. Peter is bewildered by what is happening to Jesus. He manages to get into the courtyard of the house of the high priest, but when he is challenged he denies he even knows Jesus. Luke's version continues: 'The Lord turned and looked at Peter': a look of sadness no doubt, but a look of forgiveness and love; a look that had a profound effect on Peter who 'went out and wept bitterly.'

\* Jesus offers all his love to a man crucified with him (Luke 23:39-43). One of the men crucified with Jesus senses something special in him, and pleads with him: 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' From his heart filled as always with love Jesus responds: 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'

We have been watching Jesus love. Let us focus now on what this means for us

Having invited anyone who is thirsty to come to him and drink, Jesus promises: 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water' (John 7:38). Out of Jesus' heart, yes, but also out of the disciple's heart, for in giving us his Spirit, in giving us the love he experiences with his Father, Jesus is giving us what he promised the woman at the well: 'the water I will give will become in you a spring of water gushing up to eternal life' (John 4:14). Jesus invites us to follow him in loving because he knows that we can share with him in the love he receives from the Father. He knows that if we draw on the source that sustains him we can learn to love as he loves. We can learn to love with the love he is giving us.

At the Last Supper Jesus speaks of himself as a vine and of us as his branches (John 15:5). We have been watching the love that the vine produces. He wants us to go on bearing the fruit of love: 'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another' (John 13:34). He is not asking us to love like him. He wants us to allow him to love through us. He even declares: 'Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father' (John 14:12). Prior to his death Jesus' ability to love was necessarily limited by time and place. Now, from his communion in love with God, he can pour out his Spirit of love into the hearts of anyone who is willing to love with his love.

'Father, as you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world' (John 17:18). It is through the love we show people that they experience Jesus' love and realise that it comes from God and that God loves them even as God loves Jesus (John 17:23). Jesus prays that people will come to see that 'the love with which you, Father, have loved me may be in them, and I in them' (John 17:26). We choose to *be-lieve*: we choose to *be* in his *love*. This encourages others to do the same. 'Beloved let us love one another, because love is from God' (1 John 4:7). 'No one has ever seen God. If we love one another God lives in us and God's love is perfected in us' (1 John 4:12). 'God is love. If you abide in love, you abide in God, and God abides in you' (1 John 4:16). It is God's love that fills the heart of Jesus, and he wants us to open our hearts to welcome this love.

In what may be Paul's earliest extant letter he states: 'God was pleased to reveal his Son in me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles' (Galatians 1:16). When people looked at Paul

they saw Jesus, and in seeing Jesus they were seeing God. Paul opened his heart so totally to welcome the love that Jesus was giving him that he could say: 'It is no longer I who live. It is Christ who lives in me. The life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me' (Galatians 2:20). Jesus believes in God as love and shares this belief with Paul. 'God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying "Abba! Father"' (Galatians 4:6). The first fruit of the Spirit is love (Galatians 5:22). Paul is speaking of divine love in the human heart of Jesus. It is this love that Jesus shares with us who are 'the glorious possession of our Lord Jesus, the Messiah' (2 Thessalonians 2:14).

Paul reminds the community in Corinth that they are 'God's temple and God's Spirit dwells in you' (1 Corinthians 3:16). He is speaking of the Spirit of love that flows between the heart of Jesus and the heart of God. We can love with Jesus' love because 'anyone united to the Lord becomes one Spirit with him' (1 Corinthians 6:17). We are called to love, each of us uniquely according to the way in which Jesus lives in us: 'To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for a good purpose' (1 Corinthians 12:7). The 'good purpose' is, of course, love. From his prayer-communion with Jesus and from his belonging in the Christian community, Paul speaks of love: 'Love never stops caring. Love acts always in a kind way. Love does not act out of jealousy or envy. Love does not boast; or behave arrogantly. Love does not behave indecently or insist on its own way. Love does not give way to irritation; or brood over wrongs. Love takes no pleasure in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. Love has space enough to hold and to bear everything and everyone. Love believes all things, hopes all things, and endures whatever comes. Love does not come to an end' (1 Corinthians 13:4-8).

Because it is Jesus' love that we are graced to share 'we are the aroma of Christ to God' (2 Corinthians 2:15). God welcomes our love. It is ours, yes; but it is the love Jesus gives us, the love God shares with Jesus his Son. When other people experience our love, they are experiencing the love of God shining on the face and in the heart of Jesus: 'God has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God on the face of Jesus, the Messiah' (2 Corinthians 4:6).

We are called and graced to love one another with Jesus' love. This is possible because 'God has given Christ who is head of all things to the church which is his body, the fullness of him who is in everything and fills everything' (Ephesians 1:22-23). The Risen Jesus wants to fill our hearts, for us, and so that he can love others in us and through us: 'I pray that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith as you are being rooted and grounded in love' (Ephesians 3:16-17). 'We must grow up in every way into him ... building up the body in love' (Ephesians 4:16). 'Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us' (Ephesians 5:1-2).

Paul had a special love for the community in Philippi. He knew that he was not the source of this love: 'I long for you all with the compassion of the Messiah Jesus' (Philippians 1:8). 'To me living is the Messiah' (Philippians 1:21). 'If there is any appeal in the Messiah, any consolation from love, any communion in the Spirit, any movements of compassion and feelings of love, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, being of one soul and of one mind. ... Let the same mind be in you that was in the Messiah Jesus' (Philippians 2:1-2, 5).