

04. Experiencing love: a sacred encounter

I remember as a child asking why sometimes there was plenty of wet sand with which to build our castles, while at other times the water was up close to the grass where we had spread our picnic blanket. The tide was always on the move. The answer fascinated me. My eyes were directed away from the sea and the land to the moon, scarcely visible in the broad daylight. The earth and the moon, I was told, experience an attraction to each other. The sea being 'lighter' than the land could give in to this attraction more readily. What I was watching was the sea constantly swelling up towards the moon, the tides shifting as the earth turned on its axis. I know that had I thought in terms of attraction, I would have thought in terms of an attraction of the sea for the land. It would never have occurred to me to look up. Yet the fact is that the attraction of the sea and the land for each other is but an expression of something deeper shared by both: an attraction to something quite other, something beyond the grasp of either.

I remember a winter's night in 1956. I had been pondering for many months the teaching of Saint Thomas Aquinas on how creation participates in the being of God. This evening I was sitting, alone. The tree beside me had shed all its leaves. Its branches were silhouetted against the cold sky. I was overwhelmed by an experience of belonging: to the tree, to the sky, to the universe. At the same time I felt more starkly myself. I did not experience the belonging as a losing of myself in some kind of identification with the universe. I was not the tree; but we shared a yearning to grow together towards the mystery in which the whole of the universe is involved. The tree was reaching up to the heavens, and so was I. The memory of the peace of that communion keeps coming back to me, as does the yearning.

I remember experiencing my first deep friendship some months later. It was with a fellow student in the seminary where I, along with sixty or so other students, was preparing for the priesthood. I experienced the friendship as a love that caused me to feel whole as my heart and mind and spirit went out to him, and through him to everything and everyone around me. I thank God for the wise guidance of a spiritual director who approved of our friendship. We both knew that this was an expression of an attraction that embraced us both while drawing us beyond ourselves. It was an experience of a love that was calling us to penetrate with our minds and hearts beyond ourselves and what we shared. This friendship was a grace that shaped my heart.

It also led me inwards, and I came to know what prayer could be. Each day, for many months, the morning hour of meditation would pass in timeless communion as somewhere in the depths of my being I knew that a mystery was being enacted in me of which I was much more than a spectator. I was, along with the whole of creation, yearning for deeper communion with God, but God was not 'outside'. God was at the heart of my being. I had only to be there at the heart to be with God.

With a wisdom beyond anything of which either of us were capable, my spiritual director advised us, after some months, to discontinue the closeness of our friendship. I assume that he was concerned that we were seeing too much of each other, with dangers to ourselves and to the community. Following such advice was not without pain, as you can imagine, but we knew that genuine love must be sensitive to others, and our obedience led to a deepening of prayer as well as to a fuller commitment to the community. The tide ebbed but the attraction to the moon continued.

Was it really love that I was experiencing? I believe so. I learned that love is being part of something that is other than myself, but in such a way that I become more fully my own distinct self in being in love. Love is not a melding into an obscure oneness in which distinctions are lost. The more love is pure, the more each of us is enabled to emerge in our precise difference. And the more we do this, the more profound and fulfilling the love-communion that is given and received.

Nothing is at rest. Everything is becoming. Love is an experience of our inter-connection, our communion with everything else that is also becoming. And what are we becoming? Our goal is not a loss of our unique self and personality. On the contrary, it is a fuller owning of oneself, but in communion, not in isolation. Love is the experience of that creative energy that impels us to grow, and to grow in communion with everything that is. The other remains other, but another to which and to whom we belong. And this is because everything we experience - the sea and the land, the moon and the world, my friend and I, and the leafless tree - everything is drawn towards the Other in whose being we all participate.

To love, then, is to commit oneself to be with others as they continue to grow towards the fullness of their unique individuality. This is not possible without a genuine self-love. Indeed, Paul claims that the whole of the Jewish law 'is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself"' (Galatians 5:14; compare Mark 12:33). Loving oneself involves a recognition of the fact that I, whoever I am and whatever has happened to me, am capable, in some way and to some degree, of receiving love and of offering my unique self in love to others.

To love is to resist the temptation to think that we can grow by holding others back to be part of ourselves. There is no place for this holding back. Others are part of us, they do belong, but this belonging finds expression neither in the denial of difference nor in creating a dependency. No, we belong to each other because we are all involved in a journey of love, and we are meant to make the journey together, energising each other to become the unique person we are capable of being while sharing our uniqueness with each other.

Love is not something we find, or something we fall into. Love is something we create when we recognise our belonging, delight in the other, and commit ourselves to respect the mystery of our own being by daring the journey into our own heart, while we journey into the heart of the world and while we are with others in their becoming. When this commitment is mutual, love becomes that precious gift called friendship.

Who has not experienced the attraction of love? The pain we experience when love is denied or taken away is itself a witness to our natural and radical sense that we are made for loving. The slightest taste of true love engages that longing often in quite painful ways. We know that we are not meant to live in isolation. We are not self-contained. We are attracted outwards to ever more intimate communion with the world around us, and when we experience love (the word we use for this communion), we are attracted inwards to plumb the depths of the inner world which love discloses.

We sometimes find ourselves pursuing this attraction in ways that fail to make connection with the *outer* world. We sometimes find ourselves pursuing this attraction in ways that fail to make connection with the *inner* world. Sometimes we connect with neither. When this happens we are left feeling distracted, frustrated and out of touch, not to mention the hurt we can cause to others, however unwittingly. But when we pursue this attraction in ways that do connect, we experience a sense of belonging, a feeling of being partially satisfied and in touch. This is love, and the intimacy of the love varies according to the significance to us of the communion we experience.

Our experience of love never provides full satisfaction, for there are depths to our heart and to the world that remain to be explored. The inner well seems bottomless. Our yearning seems limitless. Our longing for love seems inexhaustible.

Love is communion with reality. The truer our love the more real and more complete our connection with ourselves and with the world around us. We must trust our longing for love. We fail in love because we have not been in touch with our own reality or the reality of another. We must learn from our failures, but we must not despair of discovering love. Experience teaches us also that it is not easy to stay in touch with our heart. We experience other distracting desires. Following them leads us into relationships that wear the mask of love but that prove destructive.

I have focused on our common human experience simply to demonstrate why it is that love, and our yearning for it, generates our primary energy for living. If we understand this we will be encouraged to be more creative in our loving, and more committed to purifying the springs of our yearning so that we will learn to love ‘with all our heart and mind and soul and strength’ (Mark 12:30). The more authentically we follow our most profound yearning for communion, the closer our connection with reality. This connection reaches its peak in the experience of love.

Let us now examine three key aspects of our yearning and of the reality with which we find ourselves in communion. Each of these aspects points to the existence of a transcendent and immanent God: transcendent, because we are not God, nor is any other object of our direct experience; immanent, because we and everything around us exist only because we participate in the being of God. Whether we realise it or not authentic human love necessarily involves communion with God. It is a sacred encounter.

Let us look first at our yearning for communion – the yearning that drives all our connections with reality. The fact that our yearning for love is sometimes partially satisfied gives us sufficient reason to conclude that our yearning is related to reality. However, we are never fully satisfied, for we long for a love that is unconditional, unrestricted, and complete. The reality that accounts for this yearning, is its ultimate object, and alone can fully satisfy it. It is the reality we call God. We can expect our communion with God (our prayer) to be an experience of love, an experience of being loved and of loving.

Coupled with our yearning for love is our experience of wanting to know. We keep learning to trust this desire too, as we discover more and more truth. Yet our desire to know, impelled by our desire to love, is also limitless. Partial knowledge always leaves us unsatisfied. We want a fully satisfying explanation of reality. We want all our questions answered. That which alone can satisfy this yearning is the reality we call God. We can expect our experience of God to be an experience of truth.

When we shift our focus from our longing to the reality that we come to know and love, we realise that reality is not a compilation of discrete, unconnected, individual entities. Everything is in some way inter-connected. This realisation is consistent with our experience of love. The reality which accounts for the inter-connection of reality is the reality which we call God, for everything is inter-connected because everything participates in and is a partial expression of the being we call God. We can expect our communion with God to bring us to a more profound communion with the world and with our real selves.

Another dimension of all the objects that we know and love is that while they in fact exist, we have to look beyond them if we are to find a sufficient reason for their existing. Nothing we know and love is self-explanatory. Our consideration here is not on how things come into existence. Obviously trees have seeds and babies need parents. We are seeking a satisfactory explanation of actual present existence. We cannot look to other contingent beings to find sufficient grounds for how things exist, for, by definition, they too are not self-explanatory. The reality which provides the ultimate and fully satisfactory answer to why everything exists, and which, unlike everything else we know, does not require the existence of some further being to account for its existence, is the reality which we call God. God is the creating source, the sustaining ground and the final goal for all that we experience, including ourselves. We can expect our communion with God to bring us to a realisation that all we are and all we have, including our connections with reality, are gifts coming from the source of all existence. It is love, the love that is God, that sustains everything in being and that binds everything together.

There are many concepts of ‘God’ that are handed down in the intimacy of the family and in the public life of most cultures. These concepts arise from our desire to make sense of experience. Some concepts express true insight and stand up to careful investigation; others are the result of

oversight, and express a misunderstanding that should, upon careful reflection, be rejected. If we find accurate and inaccurate concepts in all other areas of human thinking, we should not be surprised to find that concepts of 'God' not only vary from culture to culture and from person to person, but that they represent a mixture of insights and oversights, of understandings and misunderstandings. After all, our concepts of 'God' aim to express our most profound insights into what reality ultimately is.

People differ markedly in the meanings and values that they associate with the term 'God'. Because 'God' is not just another thing or the sum of all things, certain forms of Buddhism conceive of 'God' as a 'No-thing'. Because of the experience of relating to 'God' in personal ways, Jews, Hindus, Christians, Moslems and many others conceive of 'God' in personal terms. In recent centuries, every concept of 'God' has come under increasing suspicion. There was a time when the existence of lightning was taken as a clear sign of the existence of the sky-god Zeus, and when the powerful, irrational feelings that seem to take over our psyche were judged to be the result of the action of vengeful supernatural beings. For good reasons such misconceptions have been rejected. The rejection, however, has gone so far that today 'God' appears to some to be nothing more than a category invented to cover whatever we do not understand. With the methodical and cumulative acquisition of knowledge in many areas, some argue that the very idea of 'God' is a left-over from a now unacceptable naivety.

There is no doubt that certain conceptions of 'God' are clearly erroneous. People rightly reject a 'God' who is envisaged as an extra, existing outside our world and history and experience, who controls things from the outside, as it were, and is directly responsible for whatever happens, intervening in our history at will, or in answer to prayer understood as a magical power. The history of religious practice, in earlier times and still in our own day, frequently reveals a 'God' who is glorified at the expense of humanity. Some people seem to feel the need to put humanity down in order to raise 'God' up. What is more, this 'God' seems in large measure to be a projection of human need and human wishful thinking, or human avoidance of the harshness of reality. Rather than face up to reality, we seem to want to invent the kind of 'God' to whom we can escape. Rather than face the here and now and do what we can about it, we seem to want to escape to a hereafter where everything will be as we wish things were here. There is no point in speaking of any 'God' who does not require of us that we face the whole truth of our real limits, but also of the real greatness of being human. Any serious inquiry about 'God' must be one which leads to a better understanding of and communion with our real selves and our real world.

We are rightly suspicious of a 'God' who serves to support vested interests. We still hear 'God' being used to support the ideology of military and economic victors over the vanquished. We still experience the rich and learned, and those in possession of power of all kinds, speaking and acting in the name of 'God', when they are seen to be propping up their own position. Such a 'God' is constantly being discredited and we have no desire here to carry on the charade. Who can take seriously a 'God' who supports apartheid, or patriarchy, or hypocritical piety, or a refusal to accept tried and tested facts in any sphere? The treatment meted out to Galileo in the name of 'God' is more common than we might dare to admit.

If there is value in talking about 'God' at all, it can only be about a 'God' in who everything participates, and therefore a 'God' who supports the intrinsic and inalienable dignity of everything that exists, a 'God' of truth and of justice.

Freud worked with people with seriously dysfunctional psyches. Some of their religious attitudes were little more than a jumble of infantile illusions. His findings alert us to the need to ask ourselves how free we are of such illusions? Let us be committed to name them as such when we are diligent or fortunate enough to discover them. A claimed relating to 'God' is worthless if it fails to draw us on to maturity by clarifying our identity, deepening our intimacy and enlarging

our capacity for generating the love that provides the only environment in which we and others can grow.

It is clear that all our concepts of 'God' are precisely *our* concepts. They enjoy, therefore, all the strengths of human intelligence and imagination; but they also necessarily suffer from all the weaknesses. In recent centuries, some have gone beyond criticising incorrect conceptions to reject any and every conception of 'God' as unnecessary, unhelpful and irrelevant to genuine human living and progress in knowledge. Others, while granting the need for constant refinement of our concepts of 'God', hold that the claim that 'God' exists cannot be written off simply as human projection and distortion. They hold that the claim is based on an authentic, if often unreflective, response to real human experience, and that there is a reality, albeit one upon which we cast our projections and which we distort. They see it as a fundamental and serious error to discard the real God along with our distorted concepts.

Does rejecting the many false conceptions of 'God' justify the rejection of a 'God' who, while transcending every limited being and the whole universe of limited beings, is immanent in everything: a 'God' who is the ultimate Reality in which everything real participates, the Being that is the reason for anything making sense, the One who is constantly sustaining, inspiring, informing and enlivening everything? Teilhard de Chardin spoke of 'God' as 'the heart and the beyond of everything.' Whatever errors are present in the ways in which 'God' is envisaged, the great religions of the world are right to continue to speak of 'God' and to explore ways of relating to this ultimate Reality 'in whom we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28).

The pursuit of truth in any field will suffer from fundamental distortions if 'God' is overlooked. Only within the perspective of ultimate Reality can we come to a proper understanding of ourselves and of our world, and to a proper way of living in it. The history of human involvement with 'God' has its negative face, as we have already indicated. False conceptions of 'God' continue to wreak havoc in the field of human thinking and human living. The distortions and their effects can scarcely be exaggerated. The positive face is that of the human beings we acknowledge and remember and revere as saints. And there are hosts of them in every country, in every culture, and in every generation. Nor can we overlook the sheer beauty with which we have all been enriched by those who have allowed themselves to be caught up in the quest for the divine, and have expressed their communion with 'God' in art of all kinds, and in particular in the art of loving.

Every experience of love is a limited communion with God. Every experience of love, therefore, is a sacred encounter when our heart/soul is awake and attentive to our communion with God. The experience of being awake and attentive to our communion with God is the experience we call prayer. Since God is love, we can expect prayer to engage us in a love-communion. This is how prayer was experienced by the fourteenth century English mystic, Julian of Norwich:

'Mercy is a sweet, gracious operation in love, mingled with plentiful pity, for mercy works, protecting us, and mercy works, turning everything to good for us. We speak of mercy, for love allows us to fail to a certain extent; and to the extent that we fail, we fall, and to the extent that we fall, we die. For we must necessarily die inasmuch as we fail to see and feel God, who is our life. Our failing is dreadful, our falling is shameful, and our dying is sorrowful. But yet in all this the sweet eye of pity is never turned away from us, and the operation of mercy does not cease ... Mercy is a property of compassion that belongs to motherhood in tender love ... Mercy works, protecting, enduring, vivifying and healing, and it is all of the tenderness of love; and grace works with mercy, raising, rewarding, endlessly exceeding what our love and labour deserve, distributing and displaying the vast plenty and generosity of God's royal dominion in his wonderful courtesy' (*Showings*, chapter 48).

She prays: 'God, of your goodness, give yourself to me, for you are in love with me' (chapter 77).

A work on mystical prayer from the same period includes the following:

'I tell you this: one loving blind desire for God alone is more valuable in itself, more pleasing to God and to the saints, more beneficial to your own growth, and more helpful to your friends, both living and dead, than anything else you could do' (*The Cloud of Unknowing*, page 60).

We conclude with the words of Teilhard de Chardin:

'Some day, after harnessing space, the winds, the tides and gravitation, we shall harness for God the energies of Love. And then, for the second time in the history of the world, we shall have discovered fire' (*The Evolution of Chastity*, 1934, page 86).

We cannot harness these energies if we are not in communion with God, if we do not pray.