

Valentine Sunday: The flourishing of love in the Holy Circle

When a baby is born, notwithstanding the joy, the experience can be a traumatic one for the mother, and as far as I can see, it is almost always traumatic for baby. To have to emerge from the comfort of the womb and be greeted by the dry air of the waiting world is more than good reason to let out the primal scream! But it doesn't stop there. For the sharp shock of being born gives way soon enough to the continuing sharpness of negotiating childhood. Most childhoods are tolerable, some are wonderful, some, very sadly, are a living nightmare. And the fact that we are signing the Children's Society petition for 16 and 17 year olds, just reminds us of how unpleasant childhood can continue to be right into the cusp of adulthood. One way or another, childhood leaves on us an imprint of multiple emotional, psychological and social experiences, most of which we cannot remember, perhaps thankfully, and many of which are buried in our unconscious minds. And depending on the particular details of our formative years, we venture into adulthood having reasonably successfully sublimated the worst of it, in order to present ourselves to the world in some sort of readiness for adult responsibilities. *But the fact is we are wounded.* This may not be something we choose to admit, still less to publicise. But the human psyche is not easily fooled, and if we fail to acknowledge our woundedness, we can sometimes expend considerable energy projecting its effects onto others, and making them carry our burdens, rather than owning them and addressing them ourselves.

And then there is love!... and love comes in so many disguises. If we look back, there is of course the love of parents, who try their level best through the drama of childhood to strike that tricky balance between supplying security, reassurance and protection and allowing unsupervised experimentation in the rough old world. And as some of us know only too well, all parenting is only ever 'good enough', and has somehow to make peace with its own inevitable inadequacy.

There is also the love we find in friendship(s), both in childhood and through adulthood. And I suspect that many of us would agree that there is nothing like the joy of a dependable friendship in which you can be who you are and be judged only in jest; and then come back for more and find that you are still welcome. Friendships are a great blessing.

And then, of course, there are relationships of love in marriages and partnerships, which may or may not involve raising a family, in which *the love we pledge offers itself as a kind of 'holy circle'*. And in the holy circle, each one seeks to create the space within which the other can thrive and flourish – at least this is what we aim for. And I use the phrase 'holy circle' because, from the perspective of faith, in marriages and dedicated partnerships, the space we are seeking to offer and to dwell in, is understood to be founded on the great gift of the love of God, which is supremely freeing, limitlessly accessible and unconditional. It is a space in which the love of God is given to support and inspire our own loving. It is a space in which a new creation is possible, what Jesus spoke of as “becoming one flesh”. It is a space in which because love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things, anything is possible; the frog can become the princess,... and a prince. In every relationship we stand on holy ground.

John wrote, “God is love; and those who live in love live in God and God lives in them”. I sometimes wonder if he was in love when he wrote this, or whether he had some cherished friendship in mind, when he found himself expressing something so profound about the dynamic of divine love inhabiting and inspiring human being?! For to live out of a confidence in the love of God, and the ultimate value of love, is part of what makes it possible for two people to commit “for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health”, and to pledge themselves saying, “all that I am I give to you, and all that I have I share with you, within the love of God”. Because these are extravagant undertakings by any stretch of

the imagination! Yet 'within the love of God' something becomes possible and realisable which would not otherwise have been so.

The holy circle is of course also a place where not only does love empower us and awaken us to new possibilities in ourselves, but it provides a place in which wounds are healed. Not all at once, but slowly and progressively. The family therapist Robin Skinner describes the individual personality as having a hidden 'inner screen'. In front of the screen is all that we project willingly, confidently and wittingly, as our conscious personality – that projects itself as positive, reasonably self-assured and integrated. Then there is all that is behind the screen, which is the difficult stuff, that's been buried away because it relates to the painful experiences of childhood that have scarred us in some way. And he identifies the good relationship as being the one that creates that space – the holy circle perhaps, (that's me not him) – where each one can bring forward what's behind the screen, and allow it to be integrated into the conscious personality more fully in the context of the security of the committed relationship. Of course, this doesn't happen to order, nor necessarily very smoothly, nor to perfection or completion. We are always unfinished works of art, and sometimes the rough edges just won't be smoothed off. But the point is that these things can come forward because the space is there, and crucially, the love is there, to carry the pain, allow it to ebb away and allow a new horizon of self-understanding and wholeness to be reached.

The picture I am trying to convey here is of *the glorious potential of love to heal*. We know, of course, that our best efforts are hampered to some extent by selfishness, greed and the many competing ambitions and preoccupations of our lives. But the potential for love to transform us individually and collectively should not be underestimated. And this brings to mind another feature of the holy circle, which is that it is not a closed circle. For it is intended that the benefits of every loving partnership should reach out and be a blessing to others too. In the CofE marriage

service prayers, we pray of the couple, that “the hospitality of their home may bring refreshment and joy to all around them”; and that “their love may overflow to neighbours in need and embrace those in distress”. The best love is always expansive, and as good for others as it is for the two people concerned.

And this draws us back to the letter of John and the calling there to the Christians of the Johannine community to an engagement with one another based on love; “beloved let us love one another because love is from God”, and “beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another”. The challenge was and is, to live out of a sense of inordinate grace and blessing, coming from God, as the foundation and inspiration for every relationship of commitment and obligation in the community. And we might want, therefore, to extend the notion of the holy circle to include not only every marriage and partnership, and not only every friendship worth its salt, but as a key component of our vision for Christian community now. For surely, as a community, we seek very specifically to create a space in which all can find a place – where our joys, pains and troubles can be brought to Christ and held silently and with forbearance by those around us. And what better time to be thinking about this than on the first Sunday in Lent when we have just kept Ash Wednesday and expressly recognised the reality and depth of our human failings and inadequacies, which are part of who we are. Because the only way community can work is if we are willing to first own and then forgive the shortcomings and foibles that we each exhibit and carry with us.

AS he summarises, John writes that, “God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him”. And here he brings into focus the manifest way in which we identify in Jesus a supreme pattern of self-giving love that is our truest inspiration for our own loving. *In this service and celebration*, we come to

thank God and to thank each other for the love we receive, especially in the relationships and friendships that matter most to us. And I hope very sincerely that all of us have much to be grateful for. And in a moment we will have a chance to reflect on and express the gratitude we feel in our prayers of thanksgiving. Underneath and behind this gratitude, is our rejoicing in the love of God and the love we know in Christ. That he is beside us and around us in our happiness, our failings, our pain and our sorrows, loving us to the end, loving us into life, is perhaps the greatest reason why we celebrate on this Valentine Sunday. Amen.

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