

The Advent Course - Session Four

LOVE

Welcome. Here we will take a little Advent journey through the meaning of love in the Christian Tradition. Beginning with Scripture, then moving into Art and ending with prayer, we offer these thoughts and meditations for your reflection and your own prayers. Note down the things that chime a bell or make your heart flutter.

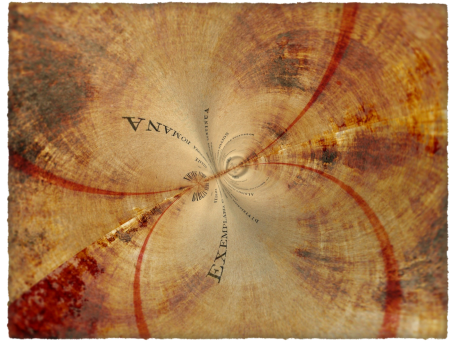
*“Love is composed of a single soul
inhabiting two bodies.” Aristotle*

Scriptural Love

If you've heard anything of Jesus, you will know about one of his famous teachings called the Golden Rule. Do to others what you would want them to do to you. The rule is a restatement of something else that Jesus said that the meaning of life is to love God and love your neighbour as yourself.

Now, that's really beautiful, but what does he mean exactly by the word love, it's an unclear word in English, because you can love your mother, and you can love pizza. And if the word love means the same thing and both of those cases, then your mother might be upset.

So what did Jesus mean in his language. Well first of all, this love your neighbour phrase is a quotation from the Hebrew Scriptures, where the word for Love is an AHAVA, however, a language Jesus spoke and taught in the day today, it was a cousin language of Hebrew, that is, Aramaic, in which the word for love is RAKHMA, but then, as Jesus followers spread his teachings around the world, they translated them into Greek using the word AGAPE.



But here's what's fascinating. The earliest followers of Jesus who wrote the books of the New Testament in Greek, they didn't learn the meaning of AGAPE by looking it up in ancient dictionaries, rather they looked to the teachings of Jesus and the story of his life to redefine the very concept of love. So, one time Jesus was asked about the most important command in the Jewish scriptures, and he first quoted from the ancient prayer in the Torah called the Shema. Love the Lord your God with all of your heart. Deut 6.5

So, love for God is the most important thing, but then Jesus quickly followed

ahava אהבה

up by saying, another command from the Torah, was also the most important to love your neighbour as yourself. Leviticus 19.18

So, which is the most important loving God or loving your neighbour Jesus's answer is yes, to ask the question means you don't get his point. For Jesus, they're two sides of the same coin. Your love for God will be expressed by your love for people, and vice versa. They're inseparable. And so this makes it clear that for Jesus, AGAPE love is not primarily a feelings for someone else that happens to you, like our phrase, I fell in love. For Jesus love is action, it is a choice that you make to seek the well being of people other than yourself. Jesus also went on to teach the genuine love for God and others means seeking people's well being without expecting anything in return, especially from people who are in difficult situations, who can't repay you even if they wanted to.

According to Jesus, this kind of generous love reflects the very heartbeat of God, and He took this even further. Jesus said that the ultimate standard of authentic love is how well you treat the person that you can't stand; or in his words You shall love your enemies, do good to them, expecting nothing in return for Jesus. This kind of enemy embracing love imitates the very character of God itself. Now we wouldn't be talking about Jesus still today if he had only said things like love your enemy.

This is how he actually lived, Jesus was constantly helping and serving people around him in very practical and tangible

ἀγάπη agape

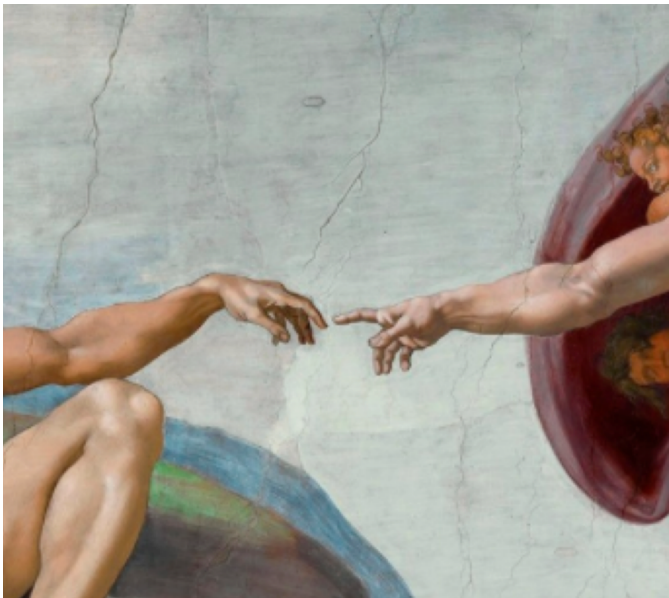
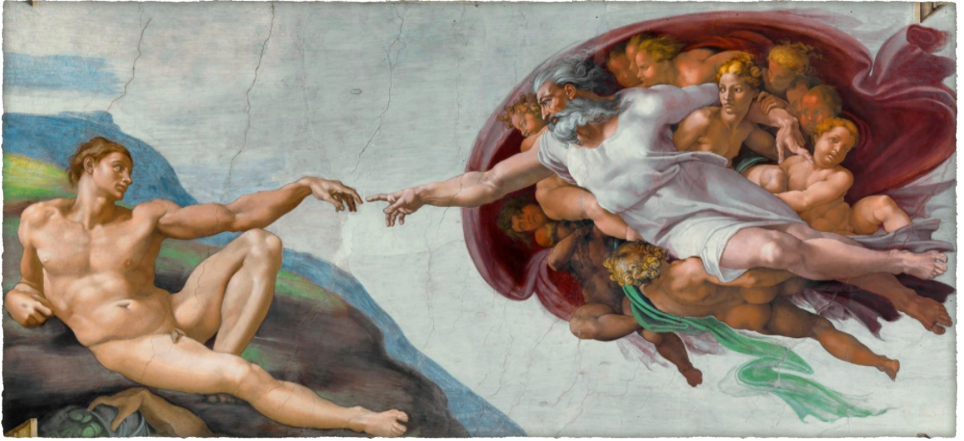
ways, and he consistently moved towards poor and hurting people who couldn't benefit him in return. He showed love for the Forgotten Ones, the people who usually fall through the cracks. And when Jesus eventually marched into Jerusalem, he made himself an enemy of the leaders of his people by accusing them of policy and corruption, but then instead of attacking his enemies to overthrow them he allows them to kill him. Jesus died for the selfishness and corruption of his enemies because he loved them. After Easter morning, Jesus, and then his followers claimed that it was the power of God's love for the world that was revealed in Jesus's life, death and resurrection. As the Apostle Paul put it, God demonstrated his own adoption for us in this while we were still sinners, the Messiah died for us. (Romans 5.8)

Where in the words of the apostle John God's own AGAPE was revealed when he sent his one and only Son into the world, so that through Him, we could have life, (1 John 4.9) and for John this leads naturally to the conclusion, 'beloved ones if that's how God has loved us, then we ought to show love for one another.'

So, Christian faith, involves trusting that at the centre of the universe is a being overflowing with love for his world, which means that the purpose of human existence is to receive this love that has come to us in Jesus and then to give it back out, others, creating an ecosystem of others, focused self giving love. And that's the New Testament meaning of a good day love.

Love in a Time of Uncertainty,

a meditation by The Rev'd Petra Shakeshaft



Michelangelo Buonarroti, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

God so loved the world
that he gave his only begotten Son,
that whosoever believeth in him should
not perish, but have everlasting life.
John 3. 1-6

High up in the Sistine Chapel God's hand stretches across the ceiling, giving life to a languid Adam. This creation of the first human being is fleshy, corporeal and perhaps not how we imagine we were created in God's image. Here, of course, God has been created in the image of humankind. The image of God is not something that can be represented in fresco, even by a genius such as Michelangelo.

God is love and those who abide in love, abide in God 1 John 4.16
The image in which we are made then, is Love. We are made to love and to be

loved; to be beloved. And yet we fail to grasp this; we failed from the start. The path to the tree was easier and the fruit more sweet than God's way, or so we believed. So we continue to believe. And so, the garden in which we were placed; the Paradise gifted to us in love, becomes a wasteland of decay and corruption.

The Advent lights God scattered for us through the Prophets flicker in the darkness, their words closed between the covers of the book. But Love is more powerful than darkness, or corruption, or decay, or disobedience, or wilfulness, or lostness, or sorrow or any other pain with which we choose to separate ourselves from that Love in which we are made.

Love longs for us.
Love chooses us.
Love comes to us.

And God held in his hand
A small globe. Look he said.
The son looked. Far off,
As through water, he saw
A scorched land of fierce
Colour. The light burned
There; crusted buildings
Cast their shadows: a bright
Serpent, A river
Uncoiled itself, radiant
With slime.

On a bare
Hill a bare tree saddened
The sky. many People
Held out their thin arms
To it, as though waiting
For a vanished April
To return to its crossed
Boughs. The son watched
Them. Let me go there, he said.

The Coming, RS Thomas

Love 2020.

Monoprint with gold thread, The Rev'd Petra Shakeshaft



The image is a response to both Michelangelo's Creation of Adam and RSThomas' The Coming.

The earth is in the grip of corruption and decay and rotting leaves form the background, a reminder of our physical mortality and potential for spiritual death.

All flesh is like grass
and all its glory like the flower of grass.
The grass withers,
and the flower falls
I Peter 1. 24

The hand of God reaches out over the brokenness. The River, from Thomas's poem, follows the line of a crack in the Sistine Chapel ceiling.

Here, it is transformed from the radiant slime into gold – its brokenness repaired, made beautiful, precious like a piece of Kintsugi Pottery. A small, child's hand reaches up; the Son's hand. And there is seed of new life – also gold – there is the promise of light in the darkness of Advent. There is Love. Let me go there.

The Whisperers by Simon Lewis (b.1945)

A Meditation on Love - by Rev'd Dr Nicola Bown



Simon Lewis' picture 'The Whisperers' seems to evoke two lovers lying in bed, sharing a pillow, the black surround of the pillow and the figures evoking the bubble of intimacy in which the lovers lie, as they whisper their pillow talk to one another.

I'd like to suggest an alternative way of reading this image. I want to see it as an image of the Annunciation. As Gabriel and Mary meet, in that holy space in which the rest of the world, for a moment, falls away and they are together, caught in this extraordinary moment of intimacy together.

It always seems to me that, Gabriel would hardly have spoken in brassy dining tones, but that his voice would have been low, and that Mary's 'Yes' escaped from her as a mere whisper, a

breath of Yes. Gabriel being so close, so intimately close to her that he could hear the merest whisper.

Whether we see this image as an image of lovers in bed, or as I am suggesting the Annunciation, it seems to me that it is an image of closeness and love. Of relationship and of the mutual giving of oneself to another. The giving of lover and lover. The giving of, by Mary, of herself, to God. In order to bring God to earth. As she whispers Yes, she whispers in the voice of all of us. In that Holy space of intimacy with God.

And as she whispers Yes, she becomes in that loving relationship, the person who she is meant to be. She whispers 'yes' to the future. 'Yes to all that is to come. Yes to loss. Yes to grief. And Yes to love.

Reflections

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

* When have you felt most loved?

* Think of someone you find it hard to love and imagine Jesus with them. How does he respond to that person? How does that make you feel? Can you pray for that person now?

* Read I Corinthians 13.4-7 (above)

* Look up Kintsugi pottery. How does love play a part in the golden repairs of your 'breaks'?

* Make some small cards (credit card size). In your prayer space, you might like to place a bowl with a candle beside it. Write the names of particular people you would like to pray for - even some you find it hard to love and pray for. Spend some moments praying for them - you might even like to write a prayer for them. When you have finished, put the card in the bowl. You can add to the bowl during the week and take them out and pray again.

* Think for a moment about Mary's Yes - the mutual knowing between her and Gabriel, her and God. Allow this imaging to prompt your own memories, is there a moment of being spiritually known and loved that comes to mind. Bathe in that sense for a moment, and give thanks to God.

Prayers

God of Love,
who created all things in Love,
who breathed your love and life into each of us
and whose Son gave up his life in love for us;
help us to see your image in everyone we meet
to show love to the loveless, that they might lovely be
and to bring your love to a broken world. Amen

Lord, as we draw closer to your crib,
help us to see that your coming to us
is a act of profound love,
the overspill of your love,
that we are called to carry in our hearts of clay.

Lord, be with us
Lord, love us,
Lord, lead us,
Lord, let us,
Reflect that love to the rest of the world.

**Thank you so much for joining in with this Advent Course
Please do let me have any feedback
or suggestions for future courses.**

**But most of all, have a blessed Christmas
May you know the Hope, Peace, Joy and Love
that this feast brings to birth.**