

What's love got to do with it?

The Greeks, it has been said, had a word for it. Indeed, in the case of love, they had at least seven, including erotic love, to which Tina Turner was referring in her song of the above title, the love of parents for their children, the love expressed in friendship, comradeship and loyalty, the love experienced by couples who have lived together for many years and have learned to accept each other as they are, and the love which one finds most particularly in the New Testament and which might be described as selfless, or 'gift love'.

It is testimony to the richness and beauty of classical Greek that it contains such a range of terms for what we, in English, include under the one word, 'love', and it is certainly true that we suffer as a result of this linguistic impoverishment. The divine command to love one's neighbour, for example, makes no sense if the first thought which springs to mind is that of romantic or erotic love. One cannot be commanded to feel that kind of love for another person: it is an emotion which is purely natural, deriving from physical attraction and delight in the personality of another and is akin, as the Greeks themselves understood, to a species of madness, albeit temporary. Neither can it be compared to the love one feels for friends, or for one's children which again are natural and human. Nor indeed, is it to be confused with secular ideas of altruism, fellow-feeling etc., because this very often includes some level of assessment as to the worthiness of the other to receive it. Rather, the command to love needs to be understood in that special category of 'gift love' or 'agape' which one finds within the teaching of Christianity and within communities which have been set up to reflect it.

What is this kind of love? It has to be seen in terms of the nature of God's love for us, as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. How does God love us? He loves us, not because we conform to the divine Law and live righteously, not because we are intelligent, good-looking, successful and altogether impressive people who by rights should be on the front cover of 'Hello' magazine, and not because we can prove ourselves in any way worthy of love, but simply because it is the nature of God to love us. He loves us spontaneously and His love has no motivation outside of itself. He is entirely unconcerned with any calculation as to the value of those whom He loves. He just loves, rather as a fountain gushes out water, irrespective of who gets drenched by it. The command to love one's neighbour is to be understood from this perspective.

Where can one find such love in practice? Among Christians, it is to be hoped, and within churches, although human sinfulness will always intrude to distort it. No less, however, might one hope to see gift-love in action in those organizations set up as charities, a word which is itself based on the Latin translation of the Greek 'agape'. If they are to be true to their name, these surely should reflect this deeper understanding

of love, and many do indeed provide an effective witness to what it means. Sadly, however, there also other charities which have succumbed to different models of care, based less on the values of gift-love than on business practice, and run by executives who think in terms of service industries and bottom lines. In these kinds of charities, the basic principles of love can be lost in a welter of 'procedures', 'plans' and 'policies' designed to avoid any kind of risk. The organisation can become an end in itself, and its original purpose, as defined in its memorandum and articles, is slowly forgotten.

Gift-love undoubtedly finds its most effective expression within communities which have been set up, not primarily on secular business principles, although these do need to have a place, but on spiritual values which inform every part their thinking and activity. Values which, for example, enshrine the belief that individuals can never be treated as means to an end, but always as of infinite importance in themselves, because they are loved by God. Values which recognise that human beings cannot be classified and labelled as in some way deficient, but that we are all brothers and sisters with different needs and abilities who can work together for our common good. And values which recognise that gift-love cannot be bought and paid for, but exists among people who spend their time together in work and in leisure, in sickness and in health, in study and in worship, and do so for the long term, often for a lifetime.

Gift-love is truly priceless. Communities which seek to enshrine it are priceless, and when we find such a community, it is worth fighting to preserve it, because it is a witness to a reality which is divine and eternal.

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