

## God is Love (1 John 4.16-21)

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How familiar are these words – ‘God is love’. Plastered on Sunday school walls and bumper stickers, it’s Christianity’s best-known slogan. But how hard it is to take in.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer suggests how *not* to hear it: he writes, ‘we must exclude any definitions [of this love in terms of] ... human behaviour, as disposition, dedication, sacrifice, will for community, as feeling, passion, service, or deed’.<sup>1</sup> The concept of love, he goes on, ‘gains a completely new meaning through the New Testament message ... God is love (1 John 4.16). ... [T]his sentence must first be read with the emphasis on the word God, even though we have become accustomed to emphasize the word “love”. God is love: that is, love is not a human behaviour, sentiment, or deed, but it is God who is love’.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, according to Bonhoeffer, we must let our concept of love be defined by God rather than our concept of God be defined by our pre-existing notions of love. OK - so what does ‘love’ as defined by God mean and look like?

Bonhoeffer says we learn what love is through Jesus Christ. ‘God’s love’ (writes John) ‘was revealed among us in this way; God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him’ (1 John 4.9). The essential feature of this revelation of God’s love in Jesus is that he lives and dies to reconcile us to the source of our life, to ourselves and one another. He lives and dies to make us ‘one’, to bring us into wholeness and fullness of life and belonging. What his being among us laid starkly bare is that we human beings live ‘naturally’ in a state of disunion or alienation. Think of all those lepers cast out of villages, those people tormented by ‘demons’. We are dis-integrated: that is, we are not whole in ourselves and we are not connected to the whole. Somehow, in the very process of becoming ‘selves’ we have become separate and divided (and there are developmental, psychological and anthropological explanations we can appeal to at this point.) However it comes about, we find

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 6, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West and Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), p.332.

<sup>2</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p.334.

ourselves as individuals, societies and cultures somehow out of alignment with our deepest truth, and enmeshed in dynamics of rivalry and fear in our relationship with life and with others. Christianity proclaims that the love that comes out to meet us in the person of Jesus is the healing of all that dividedness and fear. And this love is costly for God and for us – because we resist and evade the truth of our dividedness and we fear the pain that accompanies our healing. This love is costly for God and for us because (in the words of John’s gospel) we too often prefer darkness to light.

So despite our familiarity with it, there’s a profound strangeness in the Christian confession that ‘God is love’. What we say we believe is that the energy that gives life to all that exists – including each one of us – is *for us*, and *for the world*. The energy at the source of all life is not neutral, not benignly neglectful, but is towards us in ways that actively seek our healing and our good. That’s quite a confession of faith. And there’s more.

To say that God is love means there is no gap between being and doing in God: God is as God does. And if Jesus coming to share our life and the Spirit being poured out to renew us, is not just something God does, but is expressive of God’s being, then we glimpse something of the nature of divine life. God goes out towards what is not God in ways that honour, enjoy, create and recreate the life of the other. God gives God’s self away, for our sake – ‘God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him’. And this reveals that God’s own life, God’s way of being God, is not self-enclosed and static, but is essentially relational and is eternally directed beyond itself. And here we are at the roots of the doctrine of the Trinity, the feast we celebrate today. It is not that God is just someone with good relational skills and a commitment to reconciled community; God is *constituted* as love outpoured towards the other; God *is* being-in-communion, as Eastern Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas has put it. The Father is always being poured out to the Son, the Son to the Father, the Spirit breathed out and bestowing life.

1 John includes many exhortations to the Christian community to ‘love one another’ since God is love. As Bonhoeffer points out, this can be heard ‘as if the divine love ... preceded human love, but only in order to activate it

as an autonomous human doing'.<sup>3</sup> We are loved and therefore we ought to return the favour. But our reading should give us pause.

The love of God is not a function of God's moral or spiritual effort; God doesn't try to love us but God simply is love. There is no other way that God is. Christian life is first and essentially letting ourselves be with God, which means letting ourselves be loved: '*In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us*' (1 John 4.10). When we are loved by God, when we are recreated and drawn into the energy of God's loving, then what happens in us is love: '*God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them*' (1 John 4.16).

This makes a radical difference to how we hear the command, to 'love one another'. Detached from the lived experience of being loved, from participating in what theologian Mark McIntosh has called the 'triune event of loving', Christian life becomes moralistic and ideological. From the place of dividedness and dis-integration, we try very hard to fulfil the commandment, to give ourselves away and to love one another. Not only is this a recipe for burn out, exhaustion and resentment, but somehow this way of being casts a large shadow. The attempt to 'do' rather than 'be' love ends up manifesting all too often as self-repression, hypocrisy, judgementalism and self-righteousness, and sometimes ultimately in abuse of power which can range from the pettiness of parish gate-keepers to the outrage of child sexual abuse.

But the love of which John speaks and to which he exhorts us is not a function of sincere moral effort. It is the completely natural expression of a life which is being brought into wholeness, which is being transformed by the love of God poured into and through it. It is a function of our being drawn into the Trinitarian life of God and becomes our fullest self-expression. 'Love has been perfected among us in this; that we may have boldness on the day of judgement, *because as he is, so are we in this world*'.

How do we participate in this way in God's love? How do we become as God's love in the world? By letting ourselves be loved. That's harder than it sounds. The blocks to our receiving being loved can go very deep, far beyond our conscious awareness and control. Somehow we don't trust it; we don't

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<sup>3</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p.337.

want to lose the illusion of control and self-sufficiency, and we can't believe we don't have to earn it. But we don't. We just don't.

To know this truth is not a matter of thinking it, but of letting it penetrate us. Our contemplative practice of meditation is one of the ways we open ourselves to this reality. Julian of Norwich taught another one – a way of seeing our world and ourselves as wholes, entirely held and dependent upon the love of God. This is from her *Revelations of Divine Love*: ‘I saw that God was everything that is good and encouraging. God is our clothing that wraps, clasps and encloses us so as never to leave us. God showed me in my palm a little thing round as a ball about the size of a hazelnut. I looked at it with the eye of my understanding and asked myself: “What is this thing?” And I was answered: “It is everything that is created”. I wondered how it could survive since it seemed so little it could suddenly disintegrate into nothing. The answer came: “It endures and ever will endure, because God loves it”. And so everything has being because of God’s love’.

I invite you to take hold of your little rock – and imagine as you. Perhaps you feel more porous than your rock – your edges softening – though there may still be some resistant bits. Perhaps you feel you are just a hard knot – defended and closed. Hold your rock – yourself – tenderly; see with the eye of your understanding that it is God holding you; allow yourself to be wrapped in God’s compassion and love, allow it to penetrate the surface ... When you feel ready, place your rock beside your candle... see the light shining on it. Imagine the rocks of other members of our congregation, and other congregations and communities therewith it ... we are all part of the whole.

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‘God is love’ can sound like wallpaper – an innocuous Christian nicety that is comforting for children but has no power in the ‘real’ world. Actually, it is theological and anthropological dynamite – a confession and experience of the nature of reality that transforms us and our being in the world, from self-sufficient and self-protecting individuals, into persons-in-relation turned towards the world, alive with God’s own life and joy. Dare we trust, it is so.