

**Love (Luke 6. 27-38)**

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So how would that land for Volodymyr Zelenskyy, do you reckon? Or for those who've been fired from their jobs in the US federal government or lost access to life-saving treatment for their children? 'If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also'. How does that work for the men and women raped, tortured and terrorised by occupying forces? Or for leaders of nation states torn between the risk of appeasement and the risk of resistance. 'Love your enemies, do good and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked'. Well, good for Him. But where does that leave us?

Over the past three weeks at Benedictus, we've been exploring the three key virtues of Christian life – faith, hope and love. Yet some in the culturally Christian world no longer even pretend that Jesus' command to love applies to them. They speak openly of revenge and vindication, of domination and theft. They act violently out of bigotry and vaunting self-interest to entrench injustice and untruth. Others, in the church and civil society, continue to believe in love and want peace; they seek sincerely to reach out to those who persecute them and seem to despise them. Yet there are times when this desperate search for common ground or civil dialogue in the face of malevolence and contempt seems weak, ineffective and, in some sense, false. Do you really have to flatter the tyrant to leave open the possibility of reconciliation? Is that what Jesus would do? Do you have to hand over your own security and your children's inheritance so as to fulfil all righteousness? And if not, then how does all this fit together? What is the love with which Jesus enjoins his disciples to love? What does it look and feel like and make possible in reality?

I want to begin exploring this question with the help of the great German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was himself no stranger to life under tyranny. This is going to feel a bit dense, but bear with me for a moment!

In his *Ethics*, in a chapter called 'God's Love and the Disintegration of the World', Bonhoeffer sought to distinguish God's love from our conventional or human understanding of love. He wrote: 'we must exclude any definitions that seek to understand the essence of love as human behaviour, as disposition, dedication, sacrifice, will for community, as feeling, passion, service, or deed'.<sup>1</sup> All these human commitments and feelings may be deeply sincere and genuinely altruistic. Nevertheless, he says, they do not touch the essence of love which is 'something completely different from what these definitions imply'.<sup>2</sup>

So, if love is not dedication, sacrifice, service and feeling, what then is it? According to Bonhoeffer, the answer is familiar but generally misinterpreted: 'God is love' (1 John 4.16). He points out that in our usual interpretation, this sentence seems to define God in terms of love. As if we know something about God because we know what love is – who is God? God is *love*. But Bonhoeffer turns this reading on its head. He argues that the sentence 'God is love' must be read 'with the emphasis on the word *God* ... *God* is love: that is, love is not a human behaviour, sentiment, or deed, but it is God who is love. What love is can be known only by one who knows God'.<sup>3</sup> In other words, we can't reason backwards from our usual sense of 'love' (as feeling, dedication, service, inclusivity) so as to come to know God; rather, it's only as we come to know God that we learn what love truly is.

Bonhoeffer later acknowledges a certain exaggeration in this distinction. The love God is, is not completely discontinuous with our natural thought of love. 'The choice of the term "love" [to characterise God]... is not simply arbitrary',<sup>4</sup> he writes. Even so, I think what he's trying to say is that the gospel offers a radical new depth of

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Vol. 6, English edition ed. by Clifford J. Green (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 2006), p.332.

<sup>2</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p.333.

<sup>3</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p.334.

<sup>4</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p.335.

meaning to the concept and possibility of love. How? Well, in the person of Jesus, what becomes active and visible in our world is nothing other than the love God is. And what is this love? It is God's determination to reconcile the world, to restore human beings to union with God and fullness of life. He quotes the first letter of John: 'God's love toward us was revealed in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him (1 John 4.9).'<sup>5</sup>

Now I know this is tough going, but let me try to draw out some implications. My journalist brother once said to me that before the rise of the Christian right, you could always rely on the mainstream churches to give a soft left perspective on pretty much any social issue. This too may exaggerate slightly, but in many contexts it's as if Jesus' command to love one another, to love even our enemies, is reduced effectively to being nice, being broadly tolerant and inclusive, serving the needy, helping the poor, seeking to reconcile difference and promote unity. So far, so liberal progressive; and despite a certain shadow of self-satisfaction, there are certainly worse ways to be. But there's just one problem. On Bonhoeffer's account at least, what this gospel of liberal humanism lacks is the truly revelatory and transforming power of God's love.

By contrast, consider how the love God is acted and spoke and suffered in Jesus. I think of his encounter with the paralysed man who'd lain for 38 years by the pool of Bethzatha, waiting for someone to put him in the water when it stirred, until Jesus asked him, 'Do you want to be made well?' As if, inviting him to stop acting the victim. I think of Jesus' confrontation with the violent mob that saved the woman caught in adultery and caused those sure of their own righteousness to see themselves in a whole new way. Or consider his weeping over the intransigence of Jerusalem, his anger at the hard-heartedness of the Pharisees, the way his gaze convicted Peter of his denial and his silence exposed Pilate's compromise. Consider his utter clarity about who he himself was and his total self-offering that we might be freed from fear, threatenedness, and the power of death.

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<sup>5</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p.334.

This is love, the love God is, wholly for us, passionately offered to make us whole – exposing our self-deceptions, suffering our insecurity, encouraging us, drawing us, calling us into life. Not to fulfil any need or agenda of God's, but for our sake, for nothing. 'Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return'. Those who follow Jesus are to love as he loved. To love people, even your enemies, for their sake. Long for their wholeness, for this is to be 'children of the Most High; for God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked', and never ceases to call all of us into light.

Where does this love come from? It comes from God. It's available to us only as we are joined to God, as Jesus was. You can't love like this, you can't get there by good intentions or sincere moral effort. Love, writes Bonhoeffer, is 'the reconciliation of human beings with God in Christ ... Love denotes what God does to human beings to overcome the disunion in which they live ... Love means to undergo the transformation of one's entire existence by God'.

As for what this love looks like in particular circumstances or how it's expressed – well, that will vary. And in times of war, there's a long, complex debate in our tradition about whether loving with the love of God necessarily implies pacifism; or whether it is in fact possible to love one's enemy – in the sense of being committed to their liberation from evil and destruction – while also defending oneself and one's neighbours by arms. As Jesus reveals, sometimes love – God's never-ending call to union and integration – will be soft, encouraging, understanding and tender; sometimes it will be fierce, purifying, convicting, revealing; sometimes it will be suffering, compassionate, broken-hearted and end in martyrdom. But whatever the expression, unless our loving arises from and is oriented to our deepening journey towards union with God, then it will lack power. Our gentleness will lack authority and our prophetic denunciations will be shrill, self-righteous and fail to transform. So how do you know when you love with the love of God? Authentic love, God's love, is always vital, powerful, healing and true; it effects, that is it brings about, the aliveness, catharsis and connection that it is.

We're living at a time when those in a state of profound disunion with God and others, self and world, are suddenly and shockingly seeking to control the world's future. At one level, this isn't a new phenomenon. At another, some major shift seems underway. Not only is it easy to feel paralysed, frightened and despairing, but the idea of loving our enemies as God loves us all can seem far beyond our reach and even our desire. Yet this week I thought of lines from the epilogue of Christopher Fry's play, 'A Sleep of Prisoners'. Fry wrote:

Thank God our time is now when wrong  
Comes up to face us everywhere,  
Never to leave us till we take  
The longest stride of soul we ever took.  
Affairs are now soul size.  
The enterprise  
Is exploration into God.

Affairs are now soul size. Faith, hope and love are called theological virtues. They arise in us as we're joined to the divine life. They're not values we seek to be true to, but habits of being we receive as gift; and they keep us oriented to and living from that which is ultimately real. They are what enable us to participate in the midst of chaos and destruction in the reconciliation of all things. To grow in these virtues is the 'stride of soul' now asked of us, for these are what must infuse our speaking and our silence, our protesting and accepting, our mourning and laughing, our living and dying. We live in dangerous times and none of us know where we're headed. But faith, hope and love abide, these three, and the greatest of these is love.