

## Letter 7

Dear Alex,

'What is love?' you wonder. Ironically, the last person I remember asking this question was Prince Charles when asked if he loved Diana. But – setting that aside – you have, as always, an unerring eye for the questions that really matter. This one must surely rank alongside Pilate's 'What is truth?' and the Philippian jailer's 'What must I do to be saved?' We are back to where I ended my last letter.

I think your question operates on split levels. Much of what I have written over these last weeks has clearly expressed the emotional level. But, as you point out, that's not enough. However much love may be an emotion, it must be viewed as more than that. This brings us to the other level: the analytical.

What's more, I think we have to distinguish two further aspects: love as a human phenomenon and love considered theologically. There are, of course, even more ways of looking at it, such as the ethical or the historical, but let's stick with these two for the time being.

From a phenomenological point of view, I can't say how important it is that we keep on saying as strongly as possible that love is a universal human experience that cannot be reduced to anything else, whether biological instincts, neurological impulses or chemical interaction (although I note the notion of 'chemistry' is often used in connection with falling in love).

In saying this, we fly in the face of postmodern thinking which frowns upon the idea that humans might possess inbuilt universal characteristics or traits simply by virtue of being human. Such thinking prefers instead to see us as culturally constructed, each culture bestowing upon its members its own characteristics. Where these coincide across cultures, so be it. But this is accidental: it is not a matter of being hewn from a common rock, as it were.

We have to resist the spirit of the age on this point and insist that we share a common humanity given by God. This is not to deny that complex cultural and historical forces mould humanity into different shapes; but universally shared characteristics remain. We are not simply artificial constructions, each fashioned by the contingencies of our particular culture and society, mere bundles of cultural ingredients.

Why does this matter? Because when we talk about loving another person, we need to be clear that we are speaking of an act that, whatever its particular expression, is a mark of what it means to be made and loved by God. The alternative is that we are nothing but an assemblage (I use the word advisedly) of biologically determined instincts and desires on one hand and socially conditioned actions and attitudes on the other. And if this is the case, love is no different in principle from other human drives. Stuffing your face with fish and chips or sublimely making love – take your pick. Both are nothing more than instincts. We must avoid this kind of reductionism like the plague.

Do you remember your lectures on Martin Buber? I can't remember whether you took the course with me or with another lecturer. It doesn't matter. The point is that Buber distinguished between two ways of relating. When we relate to inanimate objects (say trees or rocks), the relationship is one of I-It: I relate to these as things, not as persons. They lack the basic features of humanity which in turn derive from the image of God.

When we relate to human beings, however, we relate as I-Thou. For the Other is not a mere It but a person. He/she can be addressed as Thou. When we look at them, we see a reflection of ourselves (hardly possible with a tree or a rock). And what's more important, the Thou regards us likewise so that they, too, see a reflection of themselves. It is a meeting of persons, not things.

When we speak of love, then, we are speaking of a relationship between two beings of the same kind, each capable of

mutuality and intimacy in ways that can be experienced only between two Thous. When you ask 'What is love?' this is the answer (or at least part of it).

Why is this way of looking at things important? Let me see if I can illustrate: think back to that couple you told me about last year. What were their names – Kylie and Jason, I believe? Or am I getting mixed up? Anyway, whatever they were called, they came to you for counselling. Their relationship had run out of steam and they wanted to know how to get it back on track.

If I recall rightly, after meeting with them a few times, you suggested that the problem was not lack of novelty (as they thought) but something much deeper: that they had never learned to treat each other as persons rather than as objects. They had begun their relationship with a simple aim: to get as much pleasure out of it as possible and then to move onto someone else when the pleasure ran out (i.e. when they got bored). In short, they were determined to avoid commitment of heart and soul so as to maximise the pleasure and then feel free to run when there was none left.

The problem was that they fell in love. They came to regard each other as more than pleasure machines or sources of gratification. Instead, they actually began to enjoy the other's company for its own sake. They came to delight in each other as persons rather than objects. But because this was such a foreign experience for both of them and one which made a great many more emotional demands, they quickly got into difficulties once the relationship became more than a matter of sensual desire. In short, love came to succeed lust.

Now I don't know if you consciously drew upon Buber as you arrived at this conclusion. But your analysis was pure I-It versus I-Thou. And when you presented it to them, it worked: they understood immediately the choice that faced them and decided to shape their lifestyles so as to reflect the movement from a thing-centred mentality to a person-shaped one. Love conquered in the end.

So much for the phenomenology. I could say a great deal more but I'm pretty sure you're itching to get to the theology. Here goes.

Of all the world religions, it is Christianity that is distinguished by love, beginning with St John's majestic declaration: 'God so loved the world...' (John 3:16). We might add what John omitted: 'even though He didn't need to'. And so we're pointed to love as much more than a purely human phenomenon. It can't be viewed as just another human instinct; for its origin lies in the character and creative-redemptive will of God. We love because he loves. Or, more accurately, we love because he *loved*.

As creatures, then, we are destined for love. We are made in his image, an image which bears the hallmark of love. When asked what God is like, we can do no better than quote St John again: 'God is love.' To love is to do what God does: it's his job.

'Now this is all very fine,' I can hear you say. 'But what does it actually mean to assert that we are destined for love or made in love's image?' Well, for one thing it means that we cannot refuse love. Unless we're emotionally distorted or out of touch with what it is to be human, we shall always seek to give and receive love in some shape or form. Indeed, when we speak of somebody as a psychopath or a sociopath, we invariably refer to their inability to give or receive love. They are simply incapable of doing either. To love is the essence of being created in God's image.

But there's a lot more to it than this. To say that love flows from our being his image-bearers is accurate but a bit abstract. Let's try a different tack. When we look at Scripture, there's surely one thing about God that hits us between the eyes: that he loves intensely, passionately and wholly. He's portrayed as Israel's lover, her husband, who when betrayed desperately wants her back and is prepared to be ever-forgiving as he stands with open arms. His love for her is unlimited, even when she casts him aside to play the harlot. Even in judgement, love persists.

To say that we bear his image, then, is to say that we are capable of the same kind of love. At this point, theologians and philosophers usually point out that there are many different kinds of love (signified by a variety of biblical words) and that it's crucial we understand which kind we're talking about. Now this may be true – confusing brotherly love with erotic love, for example, could prove a serious category error – but I want to argue that in all types of love there must be one characteristic that runs throughout. I mean, of course, the readiness to be self-giving for the sake of the other, to see them as valuable in themselves, to desire their best, to be willing to go the second mile not because it may profit *us* but because it will profit *them*. This is gift-love and the cross is the paradigm.

As you know, the term *agape* sums this up. But I hope you can see that these qualities are fundamental to all the other kinds of love as well if they are to be judged true love, whether between brother and sister, mother and son, daughter and father, friend and friend, or lover and lover. Wanting the best for the other person and being ready to seek it is the hallmark of a love that reflects the divine.

Now much theological ink has been spilt over the clash between *agape* and another Greek term for love, namely *eros*. *Agape*, it's contended, is the better of the two because it is interested in the other person in themselves, not for what they can give in return. It has no motive outside itself. It doesn't act because it finds something worth having in the other but simply because it cares for them. It seeks no reward. The one who is the object of *agape* may be the most horrible person in the world: *agape* still seeks their best.

*Eros*, by contrast, is reckoned to be an acquisitive love. It strives for what it hasn't got and is restless till it gets it. It's ego-centric, offering love only to those whom it values for what they can provide, for their ability to satisfy. Hence the modern equation of the erotic with sexual satisfaction.

The church, influenced by Plato, has traditionally accepted

this distinction. And there's something in it. But I think I want to caution against accepting it too readily or uncritically. As we've seen, it's no accident (if we believe in Scripture as divine revelation) that the imagery of human erotic love is used to describe the relationship between God and his people. Put more provocatively, does our picture of divine love allow us to imagine God as the lover? The one who longs to make love passionately and tenderly to his wife – not as a fulfilment of desire but as a sign of intimate self-giving?

What I'm arguing for is an understanding of love as something that shares characteristics of both *agape* and *eros*. In fact, this is exactly what happens when two people fall in love. There's nothing they won't do for each other. No task is too much, no request too great. Indeed, these are seen not as demands but as opportunities. The most trivial and humdrum chores are transformed into moments of transcendent delight. Each wants to give him or herself to the other, not out of self interest but just because they are there. Their mutual pleasure is simply in being with each other for its own sake. In some mysterious way, lovers desire their beloved not for the thrill they can give but simply for themselves.

As usual, C. S. Lewis puts it well: writing against those who see 'falling in love' merely as a function of the sexual drive, he observes that,

Very often what comes first is simply a delighted preoccupation with the Beloved – general, unspecified preoccupation with her in her totality. A man in this state really hasn't leisure to think of sex. He is too busy thinking of a person. The fact that she is a woman is far less important than the fact that she is herself ... If you asked him what he wanted, the true reply would often be, 'To go on thinking of her.' He is love's contemplative.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1960), p. 108.

But note how easily this can be blended with *agape*. The kind of love Lewis describes as *eros* carries within it the qualities of *agape* too: self-giving, desirous of the best for the other, valuing them intrinsically. The neat distinction between *agape* and *eros* turns out to be not so neat after all.

Of course, falling in love is only the first stage. If love is to mature into sustainable mutual self-giving it must deepen and grow. But this only means that *eros* must listen carefully to *agape* and allow itself to be moulded and shaped by it.

For me, the marvel is that in her last days, Renee demonstrated how much love truly is a blend of the two. Her self-giving, her delight in our being with each other, her final gift of the future – all these remind me how she bore the divine image of love, all other loves excelling. I find myself lost in wonder, love and praise both for her and for our God of grace.

Francis