

Trinity College Cambridge

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FROM (BEFORE THE) CRADLE TO (AFTER THE) GRAVE
Loving

Song of Songs 1 1 John 3: 16–24; 4: 7–12

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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be cleansed by your loving grace so that I may preach and we all may hear your most Holy Word. In the name of Christ, Amen

It's a great privilege to be back at Trinity. A couple of years ago I was at the other end of the Chapel marrying my wife Hannah. So it feels rather appropriate to be preaching tonight on the topic of loving.

I'll begin with a story – not so much a love story as a story about love's origins. It goes something like this, and you might recognise it: Once upon a time (near the beginning of time, in fact), the form of every person was completely round with back and sides making a circle. Every person had four arms, the same number of legs, and two faces exactly alike set on a round neck. These people (if you can picture them) were awesome in strength and in might, and their ambition was great too. As such, they tried to make an ascent to heaven in order to attack the gods. For this attempt they were punished. The punishment was not their annihilation (as who would be left to worship the gods). Instead, the gods resolved to split these creatures in half to reduce their strength and increase their numbers for worship. With the division saw the creation of lonely creatures, forever searching for their other halves. I said this is a story about love: and love in this story is about finding our long lost other halves who complement and complete us perfectly.

The story taken is from Plato's dialogue *The Symposium*; and the speaker is, of course, the great comic poet Aristophanes.¹

The first of our readings – from the Song of Songs – is not too dissimilar from the story of love described by the comic poet: it's about the roaming around in search of the one who makes us complete; it's about the idea that happiness is found in the arms of another person (rather than the self); and it's about the idea that life's driving force is love.

The Song of Songs, through that extraordinary series of poems, tells of a bride burning with a deep love for her bridegroom – her other half. And the love the reading describes is a very bodily sort of human loving. In what is surely the most romantic exchange of poetry in biblical literature, two young lovers describe their delight in the sensuousness of human loving. Their bodies become intertwined and intermingled into a union bonded by desire and love and sealed with a kiss that tastes better than wine.

¹ See Plato, *The Symposium*, trans. M.C. Howatson (Cambridge: CUP, 2008).

The scandalously erotic love poetry is enough to get even the coolest of exegetes hot under the collar. In his erotically charged commentary on the Song of Songs, Origen (by far the coolest exegete of the early church) insists on the need for appropriate spiritual training before approaching this poetry.² Because without it, the reader, he worries (that's Origen, not the Dean), 'will receive no profit at all from this book and will risk being badly injured by what is written'. It's not surprising, then, to hear that the Song has a long tradition of being kept out of the reach of children.

But what was it that bothered Origen so much? It was not, as you might think, that without appropriate spiritual training the literal would be mistaken for the allegorical. Sure, for Origen, the allegorical interpretation of scripture always wins out. But on this Origen was hardly a lone voice: the meaning of sacred writing, in the ancient world at least, was found not on the surface of the text but hidden away somewhere deeper that was unlockable by allegory. The love poetry of the Song of Songs, then, was an allegory of the love between Christ and his bride, the Church (or for Jewish scholars between God and Israel). In other words, it was principally about a *divine* sort of loving.

But Origen must not be mistaken here for just another grumpy enforcer of a rather clinical distinction between divine loving and human loving. This is a division that became inflated in modern Protestantism, popularised in the 1930s by the Swedish Lutheran theologian Anders Nygren, in his influential study, *Agape and Eros*.³ So it was that, he writes, 'there is no way that leads over from Eros to Agape'. Between the two lies an uncrossable gulf. Where does this leave human loving? Well, not in a particularly good place: divine loving not only trumps human loving but the unruly passions of human loving are in constant need of suppression and chastisement, to be kept tamed so as not to infect the purity of one's desire for the divine. No doubt there's a good old-fashioned Protestant fear of works righteousness fuelling this attack on Eros; for without it our loving could be seen to contribute to our salvation.

All this didn't bother Origen, though. What really bothered him – and this is why spiritual training was advised before approaching the text – was the risk of *not* thinking of human loving and divine loving as complexly and messily entangled. The Song of Songs might well be an allegory of the soul's longing for the divine but that deeper meaning of text in no way cancels out the unavoidable entanglement of that divine loving with human loving. The interconnections are too close to be avoided. Origen would refuse, then, to play by the rules of modern Protestantism's zero-sum game: instead, the two loves exist non-competitively, increasing in equal rather than inverse proportions. Human loving is precisely the loving that draws us into God; or better, human loving is *caught up in the circulation of divine loving*. And it is through that entanglement that human loving is purified and intensified.

² See *Origen: An Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer and Selected Writings*, The Classics of Western Spirituality, trans. Rowan A. Greer (New York: Paulist Press, 1979).

³ Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros: A Study of the Christian Idea of Love* (London: SPCK, 1953).

On what is a rather rare occasion, the Bible is unambiguously clear about where the circulation of loving begins: it begins in the divine, in God. Or, to quote from the second reading this evening, love not only begins in God but *God is love*. And God loved us all from the very beginning, from before even the cradle. In outlining how we might respond to being loved from the beginning, John – in his first epistle – gives some curious advice: according to John, the most appropriate response to the love God has for us is not, as we might expect, to love God back. But rather the surprising response to God’s love is to *be* love for one another. ‘If God so loved us, we ought also to love one another’. So it is by loving one another that we step into that divine current of loving. Or to use one of John’s richest motifs that appears here as well as elsewhere: in loving we ‘abide’ in God and God ‘abides’ in us.

One of the big claims of John’s first letter is that human loving is caught up most fully in the circulation of divine loving not in ‘word or tongue’ but in ‘deed and in truth’. But what type of deed, what type of action has John got in mind? Well, human loving is something more, perhaps, than loving that which completes the self in the most complementary and satisfying of ways. So whilst the story told by Aristophanes is a good story, it doesn’t quite go far enough. Loving in a Christian sense (as it passes through the thick wood of the cross) is something more radical, something more costly and something, therefore, more difficult. Christ loved not the ones who were most like him, or the ones most likely to love him back, but he poured out his love on everyone he met and especially on the unlovable: the poor, the suffering, the sick, the sinners, the foreigners and the enemies. This is the example Jesus offers us to follow. Likewise, then, we are also called to a loving that is uncomfortable. We are also called to a love that loves those who are not really like me. We are also called to a love that risks laying down our lives for one another.

Maybe this is why the giving of the Great Commandment, as it is known, also appears in John 13 – the reading traditionally set for Maundy Thursday. This loving knows neither status nor hierarchy, but is based on the call to be one another’s loving servant (the one who washes the feet of others). This loving is about a full-blown transformation of power relations. This loving is about the institution of a different kind of power structure – and it has been well argued by feminist theologians that the Song of Songs ruffles the feathers of patriarchal norms and in so doing upsets traditional structures of power. And remember how John singles out what he calls the ‘needy’. I just wonder whether the writer is suggesting that the Christian life is not only about loving the needy but also about revolting against the very things that keep the needy in need. It is there – in that crucible of costly action – that human loving and divine loving are most complexly entangled. And therein – in the following the example of Christ – lies the challenge for us all today.

But there’s one more challenge. Now the heirs of Aristophanes have made a good buck by relentlessly flogging this story of love’s origins as gospel. It’s packaged up in a variety of ways each of which cashes in on the good news that happiness is only found when we find ‘The One’. It is inconceivable to the rom-com industry that completeness and happiness for some might not at all be found in loving ‘The One’ but rather through a variety of *different* loving relationships. A Christian account of loving, on the other hand, imagines a considerably more complex narrative: and one that is not single in dimension or even

double but it is three-dimensional. The Great Commandment involves loving God, loving the other (and particularly the needy) and also loving the self. 'Love thy neighbour as thyself', Jesus commands. And that third dimension is sometimes the hardest of the lot. Particularly for those of us who have been brought up to think that the greatest of sin is pride, which is at root a form of self-love. But a way of learning to love thyself can be found in what we are doing this evening: worshiping. For in worship we arrive at a new self-understanding – that sees the self as living and moving and having its being in the ongoing currents of divine loving. Because God has loved us from before the cradle we can learn to love ourselves and learn to love others as ourselves.

One of the things I've always loved about this place of worship is the way that the East end protrudes from the parameters set by Great Court and overflows onto the street. And I'll end there, where I began, at the East end of this Chapel: for just as the Chapel overflows out onto the street and into the world, so too must human loving – in all its costliness and difficulty. So 'let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth'. After all, talking about loving is never as interesting as loving itself.

Amen.