

LIVING IN HIS LOVE

By BERNARD J. BUSH

WHEN JESUS FIRST encountered his disciples, their question to him was, 'Rabbi, where do you live?' His reply was 'Come and see'.¹ In a similar way, the purpose of this article is to come and see where christians love. For christian love is first of all an environment. It is the place where we 'live and move and have our being',² the interior life of the Trinity. Moreover, along with the rest of creation, our place within this Trinity is in the second Person. There St Paul locates us when he writes:

He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creatures. In him everything in heaven and on earth was created. . . . In him everything continues in being.³

Hence the place where we live with him is in him. And it is there that we will live in his love, sharing the eternal life of love, the holy Spirit. 'God chose us in him before the world began, to be holy and blameless in his sight, to be full of love'.⁴

To love as christians, we must have an abiding consciousness that our life is in the Trinity – and that it is their life and love that flow through us. It is here that our relationships to both God and men originate. We relate to God from within him, and to one another as sharers in the same life and love.

Yet we live our lives in a material universe of time and space. So we do not see the God who contains us and loves us. On the contrary, we see much that is not God, but is in fact visible resistance to life and love. We feel forces of evil and deterioration. We have them right within ourselves, where they struggle for ascendancy.

Yes, we know that all creation groans and is in agony even until now. Not only that, but we ourselves, although we have the Spirit as first fruits, groan inwardly while we await the redemption of our bodies.⁵

¹ Jn 1, 39.

² Acts 17, 28.

³ Col 1, 15, 16a, 17b.

⁴ Eph 1, 4.

⁵ Rom 8, 22, 23.

In our fallen human condition we are in the Trinity, but not of the Trinity.

Naturally speaking, in our present state there would be no hope of our bodies ever being permeated by the love of God since they are of themselves incorrigibly resistant to God. But there is a body wholly possessed by the Spirit which is capable of absorbing our own. The body of Christ, through baptism and progressive purification, is precisely the place where we lose our God-resistant life to live with his life. To live in the Trinity now means to be there with all our humanness, since it is part of the humanity of the second Person himself. And conversely, our life in the Trinity is a life that is incarnate in this world, at this time.

Thus locating the place where christians love is essential for an understanding of how we are to experience and express this love in our lives. First of all, it allows us to describe the encounter in which this love becomes a transforming reality within us. Secondly, it gives us a basis for understanding the nature of christian community. Thirdly, it makes it possible for us to list the ingredients of any genuine expression of love. And finally, it provides a framework for dealing with the obstacle to love that is fear.

St John tells us that we know that we live in the Spirit when we can acknowledge that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.⁶ Encountering Christ in the flesh, therefore, is the experience that leads to growth of his life and love within us. And this encounter takes place as we come to recognize him through the various modes of his presence: in the Church, the sacraments, through contemplation and in the mystery of christian community. Thus we meet him primarily in the Eucharist. Here he penetrates our being with his self-sacrificing love. We take him within our bodies in order that he might more fully incorporate us into his own, drawing us visibly into his Church. We also meet him through contemplation. When we become quiet to pray, we experience his presence within us. It is a real presence, sometimes consoling, sometimes reproving, always challenging, always moving us beyond ourselves to share his presence in us with our neighbour. We are filled with his life when we listen in a receptive way to God's Word in the scripture. And if the Word finds a home in us and rings true with our whole being, we know that our flesh is becoming more and more conformed to the flow of life, love and truth which is the dynamism of the Trinity – where we are.

⁶ 1 Jn 4, 2.

Then it is that we experience, deep within ourselves, peace and understanding of the mystery which is real in us but which we cannot see except by faith. For the recognition of Christ is never according to the ordinary ways of human experience. As St Paul says regarding our life in Christ:

Because of this we no longer look on anyone in terms of mere human judgement. If at one time we so regarded Christ, we no longer know him by this standard.⁷

If we are to live in his love, then, it is necessary to live by faith. It is necessary to see ourselves in a relation to the persons of the Trinity and to let this vision define our relationships to one another. Any failure in love reveals a lack of this faith-perspective about who and where we are – a failure in contemplation.

Christian community stems from lives based on this perspective. It is a way of life built upon vocation and grace rather than upon natural compatibility. Christians find it in their hearts to love their enemies, to be at the service of all men with constant fidelity. Their love is a committed love, which endures for life and through death itself. It is a struggling love, which shows its power in overcoming the forces of sin and despair. No obstacle is too great for it to overcome. No evil, interior or exterior, can crush it. It never gives up. It finds strength to laugh in the midst of tears. It can be sorrowful, repentant, joyful and hopeful all at the same time. For Christ's love in us, born of faith and carried on in hope, is the foundational experience of a new life within. Although it is a transcendent love, it is one which we find within us in a deeply mysterious way. It is not on the level of emotional reaction or transitory like and dislike, but is much deeper than all of these things. It is more like awe and humility, as my deepest self (where I dimly sense myself to be immortal) touches the same place in another. Inviolable bonds are forged there, and only faith can know their meaning. St John describes this love in his first letter:

Love, then, consists in this: not that we have loved God, but that he has loved us and sent his Son as an offering for our sins. Beloved, if God has loved us so, we must have the same love for one another.⁸

God is the source of all love; and the community which lives in

⁷ 2 Cor 5, 16.

⁸ 1 Jn 4, 10-11.

this love shows that it is based, not on our more limited ways of loving, but on the gift of his eternal love in us. The christian family, for instance, manifests the presence of this kind of love. Although the union may have originated in a natural, mutual attraction, deeper roots of love must be discovered if it is to endure. The children given to the parents may not be the ones they would have chosen, but they love them as grace from God. Religious communities too show divine love when they are formed, not merely by natural affection or bonds of compatibility, but by the common recognition that God has selected and called this group of people to aid one another to grow in his love and to show this love to others.⁹ Community is founded on, and grows in, mystery. It flourishes to the extent that its members understand the mystery through prayer, the sacraments and mutual spiritual edification.

This kind of community can exist even in the midst of evil. This is so because living in his love does not rule out the possibility of sin and failure. They are the inescapable consequences of being members of the race of Adam. What it does require is that sin be recognized for what it is and not called by some other name. It is in fact the presence of his love that reveals, and causes us to recognize, our sinfulness. The discovery of sin is the first effect of God's entry into our lives.¹⁰ He works this recognition at the heart of our being, where he touches us and draws us back through faith and hope to the source of love, there to be met by forgiveness.¹¹

In all these ways Jesus, the second Person of the Trinity incarnate, brings us to resonate more and more perfectly with divine love in our human condition. Living in his love means letting him come to life in us. And if we thus live in union with him, he will show us how to live the reality of divine love in our own lives. We must expect that this will go contrary to our natural expectations, sometimes severely and painfully so. Christ's love in us will make us small in men's eyes, and the one who would be the greatest will be humbled until he is the least. Although he has led the way, we will encounter a great deal of unconscious, and often unsuspected, resistance to recognizing this as one of the effects of living in his love. Yet 'the way we came to understand love was that he laid down his life for us; we too must lay down our lives for our brothers'.¹²

One of the first effects of this presence of Christ's love is a devotion

⁹ Cf Mt 5, 16.

¹¹ Cf Lk 15, 17-20.

¹⁰ Cf Lk 5, 1-10; also Isai 6, 5.

¹² 1 Jn 3, 16.

that leads to a kind of single-mindedness. The heart ceases to be divided.¹³ The praise and worship of God, and the readiness to do his will now become the central concerns in a person's life. They are central because God's love has become the very centre of his life. And, as we suggested earlier, there is the recognition of the same presence at the very centre of every other man's life. Contemplating this reality at the heart of our lives gives rise to a peaceful love that draws all our concerns and relationships into a unity, the human within the divine.

Thus the love that flows from the presence of God's Son in our midst is also deeply reverent. It is a love that knows how to respect the dignity, integrity, fragility and commitments of the other. I then love them the way God loves me because I see God in and through them. This means that I relate to people with tenderness and delicacy and genuine affection – not merely seeing them as those who need help or those who can help me. It means that I give and receive love by really taking the other within myself and allowing myself to dwell in him. 'By obedience to the truth you have purified yourselves for a genuine love of your brothers; therefore love one another constantly from the heart'.¹⁴ This reverent taking of the other within my purified heart, where constant love now dwells, makes me an agent of redemption and salvation for him.

Be imitators of God as his dear children. Follow the way of love, even as Christ loved you. He gave himself for us as an offering to God, a gift of pleasing fragrance.¹⁵

Another essential ingredient of the love that exists among christians is patience. All the emotional, erotic or unstable aspects of love must be drawn into the patient self-sacrificing core and heart of divine love. This is not to deny the validity of these lesser loves, but to deny them the autonomy to seek their own private ends. Control is the soul of love and enlivens it with the quality of fidelity. This is hard for the present age to accept. The 'now' generation (and that includes all of us) wants instant love of perfect union without the asceticism of suffering and waiting. Yet love needs time to mellow before it can acquire gentleness and tenderness, which are signs that it is integrating all the forces of the personality. And this is always a slow process, since it requires the purification of our competitive and aggressive tendencies. It requires the renounce-

¹³ Cf Mt 6, 21, 24.

¹⁴ 1 Pet 1, 22.

¹⁵ Eph 5, 1-2.

ment of the personal securities and positions of safety from which we manage and manipulate our relationships with others. It requires a humility that will depend on God's grace to direct and fashion our love where we cannot do it for ourselves. And it requires a willingness to have our sinfulness and our egoisms exposed. This is the service christians render one another when they love in spirit and truth. They do not simply help the other to 'think positively'. They do not merely suggest that he 'cheer up because things will get better'. For this would be simply to confirm the other's impatience. Rather, their love is an encouragement to die well – which is the same as to live well. There is continual challenge to conquer the more immediate and noisier clamourings of selfish love – to let redemptive self-sacrificing love take possession. All of this, of course, takes time and prayer.

Christian love thus leaves us vulnerable to many forms of suffering. These are part of the experience of love itself, and yet can be recognized as such only from the perspective of faith.

We are afflicted in every way possible, but we are not crushed; full of doubts, we never despair. Continually we carry about in our bodies the dying of Jesus, so that in our bodies the life of Jesus may also be revealed.¹⁶

The dying of Jesus in us is our share in his love.

This suffering will make its appearance even in the way in which christians show their love. For one thing, the love of the Lord's disciples will be based on the divine wisdom which is always foolishness to this world. Thus it will strengthen a chastity which has been integrated into the whole personality and which joyfully accepts to live within the limits imposed by existing commitments: to the commandments, to spouse or to vows.¹⁷ This joyful accept-

¹⁶ 2 Cor 4, 8-10.

¹⁷ We will find that love always implies stages of commitment, which (if it is to be genuine) must not assume more responsibility than it can bear. There are sexual ways of expressing love, for example, which characterize the permanence and union of christians within marriage, but which are not genuine outside marriage because they imply degrees and qualities of commitment that can be borne only by marriage. For those vowed to love in a characteristically different way, the words 'I love you' will have the same qualities of permanence and union. But affection will be manifested in ways which unambiguously declare that the commitment to love is in a different mode. It is true that humans need to experience love from other humans as well as from God. And it is true that genuine affection cannot be expressed in a sterile, 'formalized' fashion. Yet guidance and personal spiritual direction are absolutely necessary here if christian love, in any given relationship, is not to degenerate into the lowest forms of human need-fulfilment. The death of love is the use of others for personal fulfilment.

ance of restraints and obligations does not imply the absence of tensions in such living. We are still imperfectly integrated. But tension and pain, which result from the need for patience and reverence, will be recognized as part of love as he lives it in us. 'If we are children, we are heirs as well, heirs of God, heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him so as to be glorified with him'.¹⁸ Even Christ had to make his 'flesh' obey through struggle. 'Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered; and when perfected he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him'.¹⁹ The process of learning to love will be the same for us.

In this way even the endurance of loneliness can be a fruitful sign of christian love and a part of commitment to eternal love. Insofar as a kind of loneliness is attendant on every sort of love in this world, it is a suffering to be united to his. And the fruit of such suffering is deepened love. Thus St Paul encourages the romans:

We know that affliction makes for endurance, and endurance for tested virtue, and tested virtue for hope. And this hope will not leave us disappointed, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the holy Spirit who has been given us.²⁰

Our difficulty is that we instinctively fear the suffering that is always a part of love.

Fear and love, however, are mutually incompatible, as St John tells us:

Love has no room for fear; rather, perfect love casts out all fear. And since fear has to do with punishment, love is not yet perfect in one who is afraid.²¹

So fear is an obstacle to love. Yet fear is commonly the reaction of the heart to the intrusion of love. It can arise from many sources. It can be fear that my life will now get out of hand because there is an element of the unpredictable about love. It is a threat to my customary patterns of thought and action. It is a commitment continuing through an uncertain future.

We also tend to fear that in loving another person we may subtract from the love that we owe to God. Of course, this can be a real difficulty, since there are ways of showing human love which are incompatible with loving God. We sometimes want to take the

¹⁸ Rom 8, 17.

¹⁹ Heb 5, 8.

²⁰ Rom 5, 3-5.

²¹ 1 Jn 4, 18.

bride to ourselves, instead of realizing that the Lord is the bridegroom – whose voice and presence should make our joy full since we have been waiting there, listening for him as he comes to take possession.²² In other words, we sometimes draw off love to ourselves which properly should be directed to God. And yet fear of this must not become a motive for staying aloof, distant, ‘professional’. We are commanded to love one another, and in fact we are told that the love we have for one another will be a sign of the fact that we love God.²³

The movement of love is to return to its source, drawing all things with it. Hence loving one another in his love will inevitably draw us into a deeper appreciation of God our Father, who is merciful and forgiving and whose name is love. His Spirit takes possession of us to accomplish this from within:

All who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. You did not receive a spirit of slavery leading you back into fear, but a spirit of adoption through which we cry out, ‘Abba!’ (that is, ‘Father’). The Spirit himself gives witness with our spirit that we are children of God.²⁴

Yet for his children in this life, the Spirit of love leads us to the Father through Christ’s death, resurrection and ascension into glory. Those who love God and one another in Christ, therefore, meet on Calvary, where this love is found in its purest human form. Again, this reality remains incarnate in the Church, where we meet at the Eucharist to be the community present at his dying and

²² Jn 3, 29. John’s profound humility consisted in his understanding, ‘I am not the messiah; I am sent before him’ (Jn 3, 28), as must ours.

²³ Jn 13, 34, 35. Cf also 1 Jn 3, 23 and Jn 15, 17. As we have pointed out, in the arena of love it is impossible to intellectualize and thus manage either ourselves or others. That is why love, the authentic and the false, must be understood and disentangled by the discernment of spirits rather than by conceptual or ethical schemes. Moreover, no discernment is possible where the requirements of God’s love are not put ahead of all other personal interests. The criteria by which we can determine whether it is God’s Spirit that is dominant in a person’s life are gathered succinctly in the fifth chapter of the epistle to the galatians. Here St Paul observes that ‘those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified their flesh with its passions and desires’ (v 24). Since the love of God does not flow perfectly freely through us, when it meets resistance it produces disturbance within. This can be a saving experience as God’s love becomes a purifying fire in the soul. Only after attachment to sin has been removed can discernment proper take place, because only then is there desire for progress in love and responsiveness to the Spirit. It is then that a person can learn to distinguish the promptings and impulses of the diverse spirits by the characteristic feeling they produce within the heart.

²⁴ Rom 8, 14–16.

rising. There we grow in love by feeding it with his body and blood, the sacrament of divine love. So we are drawn, as redeemed humans, into the mystery of his life in the Trinity, where we share unlimited love.

This kind of love is what the world is looking for. It is dying to hear the words 'I love you' in a way that is convincing and consoling. The words must go from heart to heart and have a ring of the eternal about them. They must come through as though spoken by God whose covenant with each of us is unbreakable. The scepticism about love these days is largely the result of conditional promises and temporary, provisional commitments. This scepticism most often reveals itself as either sentimental romanticism or cynical brutality. We need a sign of love that exists in time but endures for eternity. Such a sign of love is Jesus on the cross, his promise that was kept. For 'stern as death is love, relentless as the nether world is devotion; its flames are a blazing fire'.²⁵ The world must be able to see that a christian commitment of love is not going to mean something different tomorrow because conditions have changed, or because loving may no longer be convenient or secure, or because suffering has entered the scene.

One indication in our times that this experience of God and love within the community is what many are seeking has been the spreading interest in charismatic renewal in the Church – the so-called pentecostal movement. This movement supplies for many an experience of enthusiastic, zealous christianity and the sharing of transcendent love. This phenomenon, along with others that could be cited, points to a need in the Church for the kind of love we have been describing.

Thus there is the continual movement of God's love within each of our lives, a creative action which calls our being into a unity. In this movement we live more and more deeply in the heart of the life of the Trinity – their love, where we must truly meet one another. 'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Live on in my love'.²⁶

²⁵ Cant 8, 6.

²⁶ Jn 15, 9.