

BEFRIENDING OUR DESIRES

By PHILIP SHELDRAKE

CONVENTIONAL IMAGES OF Christian holiness do not encourage us to befriend our desires or our bodies. Indeed, they usually suggest that saints, if they ever show signs of personal desires, soon lose them in overwhelming conversion experiences. In hagiographies, ‘mere desires’, which have strong bodily associations, tend to be replaced by ‘spiritual ideals’. It is true that human desire is an ambiguous matter but I believe that unless we own our desires in the first place, we will never learn how to recognize those that are more fruitful and healthy, let alone how to live out of the deepest and truest desires of all.

Desire is intimately associated with our capacity to love truly – ourselves, other people, ideals, God. Yet, love is not simply a matter of immediate feelings. There may be times, even in deep love commitments, when tangible feelings are absent. By revealing a focused attention and dedication that is richer and deeper than either feeling or mere duty, love ultimately proves itself. It is perhaps what the anonymous author of the English mystical text, *The cloud of unknowing*, meant by ‘naked intent’.

Desires or ideals?

Unfortunately, where human love has been allowed a role in spirituality, it was traditionally the disinterested, universal love of *agape* rather than the passionate and particular love of *eros*. These have often been treated as a higher love and a lower love. Only *agape* was commonly associated with God and therefore holiness, even though *eros* played an important role in the thinking of some significant Christian writers such as the German mystical theologian, Meister Eckhart. It is all too easy for a so-called universal, disinterested *agape* love to be simply *uninterested* and well protected. A gift of everything but myself. Donation without commitment. I believe that the radical separation of *agape*-love from *eros*-love is a very unhelpful way of seeing things.

In practice, human desires have a particular association with *eros*-love, or ‘erotic power’, and are feelings of attraction towards or aversion from objects, people and ideas with strong bodily expression.

Desire is essentially personal, that is to say associated with the kind of person I am. It is not some kind of impersonal power ‘out there’ that controls me whether I like it or not. Desires are best understood as our most honest experiences of ourselves, in all our complexity and depth, as we relate to people and things around us. Desires are not the same as instincts – either human ones or those of other animals – because in fact they involve a reflective element. We also need to rescue ‘desire’ from attempts to reduce its meaning to sexual libido and its increasingly murky associations with abuse or sexual power games.

At the beginning I distinguished between desires and ‘high ideals’ in traditional presentations of holiness. But in fact desires have a great deal to do with authentic ideals. The point is that desires and true ideals both have a more grounded quality than what we generally understand by more abstract ‘spiritual aspirations’. Desires are more intrinsic to the reality of each person. Aspirations, on the other hand, often speak rather more of *idealization*, of something outside myself which is indeed detached from my own experience and capacities, but against which I feel I should measure my life. If this is the case, we can think of desire as an openness to the fullness of *what is* rather than to ‘what ought to be’. Desires, then, contrast with a world of duties or of unrealistic dreams.

The powerful effect of various Christian ascetical trends presented the ideal human being as free from need and desire – especially our apparently inescapable dependencies on food and sex. Because desire has a grounded quality it is inevitably linked to our physical senses that in turn connect us to the material world. In a way, all desire is ‘sensual’, that is, associated with our senses. It is interesting that we instinctively make this connection when we speak of arriving at a more healthy way of seeing and doing as ‘coming to our senses’.

The power of desire

Desire is a powerful matter. Although individual desires, like all feelings, vary in intensity, there is nothing passive or limp about desire, for it gives energy and direction to our psyche. The fourteenth-century Italian mystic Catherine of Siena recognized this positive and extraordinary power of our desires when she wrote that it makes them one of the few ways of touching God because ‘you have nothing infinite except your soul’s love and desire’.¹ The German Dominican mystic of the same period, Meister Eckhart, suggested that the reason why we are not able to see God is the faintness of our desire. In the graceful language of desire that permeates Archbishop Thomas Cranmer’s *Book of Common Prayer* there is a difference between following ‘too much the

devices and desires of our own hearts' and the 'holy desires', 'good counsels' and 'just works' that proceed only from God's inspiration. Yet, even 'holy desires' – the desires that ultimately find their rest and quietness only in God – tap into energies that are partially physical.

The sensual, indeed sexual quality (understood properly) of even 'holy desires', is witnessed to by the language of many of the great Christian mystics. The problem is that, if we have frequently been taught to understand the spiritual life as mainly, if not exclusively, about *giving up* things, we may never hear the call to engage with life or particular issues in a passionate way. Attention to desire, on the other hand, is about cultivating in ourselves that capacity for passionate concern.

Because desire is such a strong thing there is always a hint of risk. Some desires may enslave us, others dissipate our energies. But desire can also generate a power and energy to galvanize our spirituality. The fact that we frequently do not allow ourselves such risks and lack a lively spirituality has close connections with the historical absence of a serious and healthy theology of the Holy Spirit in western Christianity. This problem goes far beyond the presence or absence of a few dramatic manifestations of 'charismatic' gifts. The Spirit blowing where it wills is the risky, wild and profligate side of God inviting us to a similar risky freedom, to pour ourselves out into situations, commitments and relationships. The Spirit is vulnerable as well as powerful. To allow ourselves actively to desire is also to be vulnerable. The Spirit of God given to us does not simply lead us into all truth but also into the vulnerability of Jesus' way. But to take such risks is at the same time to know ourselves to be held securely and to be safe at some deep and essential level beyond our own powers of control. The Spirit is also the indwelling power of God in the heart of each of us, sustaining us.

Should I have desires?

Two common reactions about desire somehow sum up our human and spiritual dilemma. The first is, 'I have so many desires that I don't know what to do with them'. Without doubt such feelings are partly related to fears about loss of control over our inner life. But the variety of desires is also confusing. This makes our experience of desire appear ambiguous with no reliable means of distinguishing between the superficial and the deep, the healthy and the unhealthy. There are certainly many conflicts that we shall have to face if we decide to take our desires seriously.

The second reaction goes something along these lines: 'I was taught not to have desires – or, rather, I was given the message from childhood

onwards that it was important to fulfil the desires of certain other important people in my life'. So, even more powerful than mere 'oughts' were the people other than ourselves whose desires we were taught to fulfil. These might be parents, teachers, our spouse, 'The Church', and, most powerfully of all, God. Christian teaching has tended to place a strong emphasis on external sources of authority in contrast to personal desires. 'Desire' suggested private judgement and the uncontrollable; duty, faithfulness to the expectations of others, or self-denial in an almost literal sense of denying one's personality and tastes, too easily became the criteria for spiritual progress.

St Ignatius Loyola, in his *Spiritual Exercises*, invites any person who makes the retreat to 'ask God our Lord for what I want and desire' at the beginning of every period of prayer. So many of us find that our unconscious response is to exclaim, 'What *I* desire? I have no desires!' Or, we say to God, rather prematurely, 'I want what *you* want!' We find ourselves stuck – instinctively mouthing the 'appropriate' feeling or the truly spiritual aspiration! While it is true that nowadays the language of co-dependency and addiction is sometimes used too glibly in spirituality circles, there is some truth in admitting a condition of spiritual addiction which leads us to fulfil the desires of others (even a God created in the image of human authority figures) in a compulsive way that erodes our own identity.

Desire and God

The problems that many Christians, including myself in the past, have found about thinking of desire as a key to our spiritual journeys, are associated partly with inherited images of a disengaged God whose perfection (based partly on an Aristotelian view of the universe) is to be self-contained, still and at rest. According to this image, God's will is eternal, predetermined and extrinsic to our own hopes and feelings. If we believe ourselves to be created in the image of *that* God, we can easily associate desire and passion with lack of balance, confusion, loss of control and dangerous subjectivity. Consequently, we do not instinctively relate to the more biblical notion of a God who is passionately engaged with the whole of creation, whose life is a continuous movement out of self, who is God precisely as the one who out of love sends the Son into our world not to condemn it but to redeem it.

Desire is also closely linked to human sexuality which seems to have little to do with common (male-created?) perceptions of the spiritual. Desire, then, is too often viewed as disturbing or misleading, even if pleasurable, rather than something to be embraced as a positive and

dynamic force. As a consequence, human love for God has been treated for centuries as entirely unique and disconnected from all other forms of human loving.

Despite the power of all this psychological and spiritual inheritance, I believe strongly that spirituality is in fact intimately associated with desire – our own and God's. Human longing for fulfilment in God does not need to be based on our denigration of other forms of love that connect us with created reality. On the contrary, all of them are interconnected. For this reason we can validly talk of 'erotic' elements in our love of God. The highest form of love, drawing us into a more perfect relationship with God, includes rather than excludes the best in all our human experiences of love.

Authentic desires

While all desires are real experiences, not all are equally expressions of our authentic selves. Certain desires spring from a more profound level of ourselves than do others. Depth of desire is not necessarily the same as intensity of feeling. For example, we can have strong and immediate desires for revenge against those who hurt us. This is natural. Yet, spiritually and humanly we need to move beyond that level of desire to a deeper, more authentic level where the power of forgiveness can be found. If you like, authentic desires come from our essential selves rather than from the surface of our personalities, or from our immediate reactions to situations and experiences. At this level the questions 'Who am I?' and 'What do I want?' touch intimately upon each other.

Thus, to return to the teaching of Ignatius Loyola, 'to ask God our Lord for what I want and desire' as we focus our prayer is an invitation to us to acknowledge our immediate sense of need. But this is only a starting-point for the gradual unfolding of what it is to be passionately and deeply engaged. Our Great Desire is sometimes well hidden beneath a confusing mass of insistent wants, needs and longings. To move through the various levels of desire clearly demands discernment.

If in trying to identify our authentic desires we may identify who we truly are, we can think of our authentic desires as vocational in orientation. They can be guides to what we are called to live and to do – indeed to become as a reflection of what God desires for us, as expressed in the process of our very creation.

Because the more authentic desires touch upon our identities they also touch the reality of God at the heart of ourselves. Our most authentic desires spring ultimately from the deep wells of our being where

the longing for God runs freely. This is so even if such desires are not always expressed in explicitly religious terms. Our deepest desires, therefore, move us to some degree beyond self-centredness to self-giving. To put it another way, these desires are not narrowly concerned with ourselves but with the growth of the kingdom of God. They reflect God's own desires, God's longing, for the world as well as for every particular person. In this sense, authentic desires have a social or collective dimension.

There is obviously something of a paradox here. Deep desires reflect what is uniquely personal. Yet, at the same time, the more deeply we go into ourselves, the more surely these desires are seen to transcend individualism. At the level of deep desires, any distinction between what I desire and the desires God gifts me with actually begins to blur. The more profoundly we reach into ourselves the more we experience desires that are *both* uniquely our own and also uniquely God-given. I think it is important to affirm at this point that these remarks are true of healthy sexual desire. The quality of our sexual desire is a kind of paradigm of the kind of people we are and cannot, therefore, be distinguished from other kinds of desire. It is for this reason that I want to turn to the question of sexual desire in the remainder of this article.

Spirituality, desire and sexuality

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. (1 Jn 4: 7-8)

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love . . . This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. (Jn 15: 9 and 12)

In the Christian vision of life, human love is called to reflect the very nature of God. The Christian spiritual tradition has sometimes used the language of human, even sexual love in terms both of God's way of relating to humankind and of our way of union with God. The trouble is that, from quite an early stage of its history, Christianity as a whole has tended to treat sexuality and 'the erotic' as particularly symptomatic of a world that has fallen away from God. So sexual ecstasy and spiritual ecstasy were not comparable. More usually, sexual feelings were a profound problem.

Obviously, we cannot entirely bypass these long-standing difficulties about linking spirituality and sexual embodiment. However, I want

here to explore, in relation to the theme of desire, some positive ways of re-envisioning human sexuality, including its active expression, as a path to holiness and to God.

First, there is an important difference between false eroticism and true *eros*-love. The first is an uncontrolled desire to draw other people into myself. It is, therefore, invasive and possessive. Ultimately we want to be gratified. We do not truly want other people for themselves. In contrast, *eros*-love is a uniting power. True sexual desire is desire for another person mediated through bodily closeness. Spiritually, the human body is the sacrament of a person who is in the image of God. True erotic desire recognizes the sacrament for what it is – something that points beyond itself to the reality of a person, to the potential for a profound unity between persons and also with the God who lies at the heart of human existence.

The depth of human love, while ultimately open to an ideal of universality that is proposed by the Christian gospel, is firstly particular, passionate and embodied. This does not make it less spiritual, for in the Christian way of seeing things God, incarnate in the person Jesus, is revealed as passionately engaged with the particular – with time, event, place and person. Sexual desire, if it moves beyond the superficial to the depths of love, is similarly self-giving and committed. Yet the idea that the body-language of human love is a concrete articulation of the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ seems pretty daring to some people. How can we compare the love of God with the urgent, painful and sometimes wounding experiences of human longing and passion? Is it not the case that many people think that Jesus was like us in all things but . . . sex? But through the incarnation, God refused to be seen as a mere abstraction. Instead, God became human in a physical, and therefore sexual, person who experienced pleasure, pain and need.

The scandal is not in linking human sexuality to Jesus or to God's self-giving but in the fact that Christianity, while based on embodied divine love, has so little place for the religious significance of sexual love. I invite you to ask yourself how many people you know, including yourself, who would tell their spiritual history in terms based partly on sexual feelings or experience. How many of us, too, would see our sexual growth (pain or passion) as intimately associated with our following of Christ or as liberating us to enter more deeply into the desire of God?

It is important not to reduce our understanding of sexuality, love or intimacy to genital activity. Sexuality in its broadest sense covers our whole experience of embodiment – a huge area of feelings and emotions that move us towards other people. And this is true of all kinds of

relationships, including those of single people. It is, if you like, what enables all of us to express tenderness, closeness and compassion.

The call to intimacy at different points in our lives is an invitation to take risks. For all human love can come to an end, may deceive, is partial, is not totally and finally reliable. Yet, our capacity and need for intimacy is a call to find, *within* this risky human loving, the love of God that is total, constant and faithful. Deep human friendship is a powerful contribution, arguably the most powerful and graced, to a loving union with God.

The call to intimacy is also a call to learn that, however much two people love each other, they never own each other nor finally know each other. There is a permanent mystery in the other person. The risk of intimacy reveals the truth of ourselves, teaches us about availability, educates us in truthful self-disclosure and of all our experiences is the one most likely to provoke real change.

The search for love also reveals the need for a balance between solitude and intimacy. An intimacy that is spiritually healthy allows the other person to remain securely in their own skin. The German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, in *Letters to a young poet*, suggested that real love means 'that two solitudes protect and border and salute each other'.² That seems a wonderful description not only of human intimacy but of God's intimacy with us revealed in and through human loving.

Sexuality is a testing ground of the integration or fragmentation of our personalities. The very power of sex makes it impossible for it to be a neutral reality. Wrongly directed sex (or the sexual expression of our wrong directions) tends to be compulsive and destructive. But the converse is true of a joyful and balanced sexual awareness. There is a self-transcendence in which the greatest pleasure may be the pleasure of the other. Equality, mutuality and reciprocity are the hallmarks of a mature, free, non-possessive, non-abusive love. The depths of intimacy are profoundly self-giving in their direction. We slowly shed our unauthentic selves and come to live and act more and more from within the truth of who we are, but equally we allow the other to live in the truth of who *they* are.

To give and to receive sexually has a sacramental quality as long as it truly aspires to be a gift of *self* and a joyful receiving of another person rather than merely an exchange of bodily stimulations. Spirit touches spirit. Appropriate sexual body-language is a sacrament of Real Presence – both the true and unashamed presence of one person to another and, within that and cementing it, the Real Presence of the indwelling God. We may recognize God in the breaking open of lives for each other.

Some people have suggested that sexuality and mysticism are inter-related, psychologically and spiritually. This makes a great deal of sense to me. For the religious person both sexuality and contemplation are channels of union with God and/or another person which involve the dissolution of the boundaries that normally identify us as individuals, distinct from other people and from all that surrounds us. Though risky, such boundary-crossing can take place without loss of personal identity.

Intimacy, whether genital or not, may at times be an ecstatic experience. However, we have been conditioned not to think in this way because it is thought to blur the distinction between sacred and profane. Yet mysticism is not limited to extraordinary experiences that are given to very few people. There can be a truly grace-filled, mystical transformation of everyday experience. Given this, sexual union has the potential to be one of the primary God-given channels for this transformation.

Ecstasy is an experience of temporary boundary-dissolution – of perception and living. Ecstasy is a moment in which some otherwise distant reality is glimpsed as here and now and at one with oneself. This is a peak experience. Whether in the context of contemplation or sexuality it is something that it is dangerous and damaging to grasp for its own sake. It is, after all, possible to become addicted to altered states of consciousness. But peak experiences do have their place in human life and are *not* to be viewed with suspicion. In contemplative mysticism such experiences point to a transformation of the whole of life towards the source of all being and meaning that is God. The same, I would suggest, can be true of the ecstasy of intimacy or sexual union. In other words, the ‘glimpses’ of eternity provided by sexual or contemplative ecstasy serve to deepen our personalities and our perceptions of reality.

We need to maintain a certain delicacy here. A true human intimacy is a mirror of God’s relationship with us. This involves holding in proper balance an appropriate dissolution of personal boundaries and a continued respect for personal space. It is an unfortunate fact, of which we are being made increasingly aware these days, that the sexual crossing of boundaries has often been violent and abusive. At the heart of most cases of sexual abuse, including rape, lies the desire to gain power over another human being.

True human desire, like God’s desire for us, is respectfully attuned both to the self and to the partner. Each person may be lost in the other but individual boundaries are not abused. Each person freely allows them to be crossed in a way that enhances each partner rather than

destroys his or her identity. In the end the commandment in the Gospel of John is to learn how to love in a truly human way that is, at the same time, a God-shaped way: 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you'.

NOTES

¹ Catherine of Siena, *The dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), p 270.

² Rilke, Rainer Maria, *Letters to a young poet* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1954), p 59.