

February 2012

## With my Body I Thee Worship

*Only in the truest emotions of our hearts is God revealed*

As Lent comes along each year, it offers an opportunity to stop and reflect on aspects of life that are often taken for granted, where we fail to see into the heart of things, where relationships, happenings; ordinary and extraordinary, are charged Incarnation – God made Flesh.

A few years ago I was called, during the night, to the children's ward at Leeds General Infirmary. A baby had just died. When I walked into the ward the young parents stared at me, and angrily asked, 'Where is this loving God of yours now?' I remember mumbling something about the fact that God was probably crying like they were. But what has stayed with me so clearly is that, ignoring me then, the father took his wife in his arms and said, 'You know I love you.' I have always felt it such a privilege to be present at that sudden, shy, and emotionally charged moment, when a husband, at the point of tragedy, tenderly whispered those words of life. It is unforgettable because it is so real, so true and therefore so sacred.

My understanding of Incarnation now is that such moments are the only ones in which God can touch and hold us, redeem and save us, console and empower us. The way the Word-become-Flesh heals and restores happens in no other situation than in the human interplay of senses, emotions and physical relationships. In a deadly dualism, we find it so difficult to accept the revelation that it is God's delight to be worshipped in the way we touch and look at each other, in the way we listen and talk to each other, in the way we forgive and promise to start all over again. Instead we seem to have erected a separate holy edifice, an institutional locus, for God's encounter with us to happen, for the divine intimacy to take place.

Where else is there to experience the abundant life promised by Jesus if not in the trust and encouragement of those who love us, in the almost impossible words of forgiveness from those we have hurt, in the sacrifices we make to stay faithful to our partners? Our senses and emotions, our most intimate feelings, our wildest aspirations and our deepest despair, our sins and our failures – such are the only moments in which our incarnate God can be intimate with us. Is this not the reason behind Karl Rahner's famous definition of sacraments as 'celebrations of what is already there in human experience'?

The senses have rightly been called the thresholds of the soul. They are the only means we will ever have for feeling the embrace of God's joy and relentless trust in us. In the sacrament of marriage, where human love is revealed to be divine love in disguise, we have such a shining example of the sacredness of our humanity. It is where people set each other free, release the creativity and beauty in each other's hearts, give permission to each other to be truly themselves. 'With my body I thee worship' (from the Ritual) is, at the same time, a human promise, a divine prayer and a potentially graced experience of God's essential delight.

But if you dare to love be prepared to grieve. The mystery of pain and death that we tend to apply only to the Christ of Good Friday is daily played out in every marriage across the world. Only in the cauldron of our emotions, when we are overwhelmed by the forces within us, have our doctrines, liturgies and scriptures any real meaning.

For many Christians, this understanding of our church is too beautiful to be easily believed. Most people do not understand the fleshing of the Word to mean that now the experience of God has to do with the body as well as the soul, with the kitchen as well as the cathedral, with physical pleasure as well as spiritual pain, with human passion as well as contemplative prayer. Instead of relentlessly trying to drag the 'secular' experiences of marriage into the territory of the church, the church's role, in truth, is to rejoice and embrace the divine love and meaning already within the magic and mystery of the way human beings love, create new life and say 'sorry' to each other. The daily 'ordinariness' of married life is the human presence of God in every home. We must strive to become more, not less, human. The eucharistic challenge is to keep reminding us of this mystery – to keep redeeming and naming each passing moment as a place of grace, a little epiphany, in a place that is already the body of God.

In his book, *Living Love*, Jack Dominian writes: 'We live in an age where relationships are considered the supreme expression of being human. Christianity has to recognise this reality by acknowledging that sanctification is to be found in the love present between people ... the world lives this truth in a shadowy, unclear way. But it knows that there is something sacred about relationships ... the world may not trust the churches, but everyone trusts genuine love because, however wounded we are in our personalities, we all have a sense of what it means, and we hunger for it.' He is right. There is a persistent suspicion of 'mere' humanity that has poisoned all our recent efforts at promoting the dream and revelation of Jesus Christ. True evangelisation will only ever really happen right where people and passions storm and whisper, love and fear, hurt and heal. God's love is not lessened when human love is raised. Nor is the church diminished when the table and bed of the marital home are regarded as altars to God's glory, too. In fact the Eucharist serves only to sift and save, to reap the harvest of all that happens in the life of a family.

And then the definition of the home as the 'domestic church' takes on a whole new depth and vibrancy. It is in the agony and ecstasy of marriage, in the infinite heights and depths of human minds, bodies and souls that the mysterious potential of human love is played out. And there, and there only, is played out too the tenderness, compassion and continual fleshing of our lovely God.

There is a most beautiful theology of marriage waiting to be explored. Karl Rahner emphasises that without the previous celebration of the raw reality of life and marriage, the subsequent celebration of the sacraments in church will be devoid of meaning. Without the lived life of love, first, our liturgies are empty. The thresholds to heaven are opened only from our earth. And every single moment of our ordinary and extraordinary lives are the first rungs of this Jacob's ladder. There is no other place to encounter God; no other place for God to encounter us. It is all of a piece. Everything belongs. Ordinary miracles can be daily encountered. Sacred liturgy reveals, purifies and celebrates the divinity of every act of love.

We have forgotten that God can only love us through the human heart. When the young father clasped his dead baby in one hand, and held his weeping wife with the other, what a supreme struggle between love and death went on inside him. Accepting the overwhelming tragedy of the death of his dreams, he could still tenderly whisper tremulous words of life into his distraught wife's heart. In a hundred lifetimes could there ever be a more searing, intimate glimpse of the human power of God made flesh?

