

Week Beginning 15th February 2015

LANGUAGE OF THE HEART

“I swear to you by the stars above,
And below, if such there be,
As the High Court loathes perjurious oaths,
That’s how you’re loved by me.”

Valentine greetings such as Ogden Nash’s verse will criss-cross our planet this week-end as lovers compete for new expressions of their love. Little did the third century Saint realise what he was starting when he signed himself off with ‘from your Valentine’ in a note to a girl he had cured of blindness!

When we experience love we reach for a new language. When we sense a transformation within us we search for new ways of expression. Pope Francis repeatedly refers to the need for ‘a language of the heart’. When we struggle to bring relief to a dear friend we ache for the right words. In ‘Words for It’ Julia Cameron captures this anxious moment:

“I wish I could take language and heal the words
that were the wounds
You have no name for.”

In a troubled Church there are also those who long for more beautiful ways of communicating the mystery of God’s love. For too many hurt people even the word ‘God’ brings memories of the hard Judge preached by hard men in a hard church. Well aware of this the Pope proposes using ‘the mother-tongue’, a more feminine, intuitive, more ‘tender’ way of revealing divine love.

‘Out from the heart (which knows by experience and by suffering),’ writes theologian Karl Rahner, ‘human words arise, intimate words, words of the heart, words of God that have only one meaning, a meaning that gladdens and blesses . . .’ The message of a prophet, a lover, a visionary can never be truly said in prose alone. Rhineland mystic Mechtild of Magdeburg writes:

“God speaks . . .
When your easter comes
I shall be around you,
I shall be through and through you
And I shall steal your body
And give you to your love.”

A lost, powerful, poetic and mystical strain running deeply through the Catholic faith is slowly being recovered. A precious awareness is happening in people when they reflect on the abiding meaning of God’s unconditional love, and when they experience that divine presence in all their relationships. Their closeness to God becomes more intense, more personal and more universal. They search for new words for a re-vitalised love-story.

A feminist critique of our attempts at restoring a language of love around God sees current usage as oppressive and divisive. The exclusive and distancing language of the 'new translation' is a case in point. It is high time to turn to the mystics among us. Without listening now to the wisdom and consciousness of women, and to the language and symbols of love that reflect and embody their experiences, the Church will fail to find worthy words to communicate inexpressible mystery.

Writer Joyce Rupp beautifully expresses the word of love in terms of melody. She compares each soul to an empty, silent flute awaiting the lips, fingers and breath of God. And then we become the very music of divine love's language. Rupp writes:

"The small wooden flute and I,
we need the one who breathes,
we await one who makes melody."

How can so sublime a mystery of divine desire be described? God uttered the language of love and Creation emerged. Chronologically later, but first in intention, Jesus was born. God is fleshed into humanity. Humanity, then, is God's language of love. 'You are God's love-letters,' wrote St Paul, 'written not with ink but with the love called the Holy Spirit; not on tablets of stone but across the pages of your human heart'. There are times in the seasons of the soul when the phrase 'the Word became flesh' strikes us with new, astonishing, shocking force.

We are people of the Flesh, not just people of the Book. God's Word is translated into muscle and bone; inscribed in flesh and blood. That Word, for Christians, is now their own physical presence, the loving way they listen, look, speak, touch, create. We themselves, in our complicated, ambiguous humanity, are the last, most complete and beautiful utterance of the Word. Most people find this too difficult to believe.

'Fill my whole being so utterly,' wrote Blessed John Henry Newman, 'that my very life may only be a radiance of you . . . not by words but by example, by the catching influence of who I am . . .' In passing, one of Newman's 'examples' might be a loving invitation back to the family table, by Mother Church, for all those banished from it. In God's eyes they never left it.

St John Paul II said that 'the body makes visible (God's) invisible love'. This mystery is experienced and expressed above all in the mutual intimacy and identification of Holy Communion. 'We are beyond words here,' the Saint said, 'we are in the realm of the physical, the sensual'. A transformed world is revealed.

Maybe this is the kind of 'new country' Nobel Prize winner Rabinadrath Tagore wrote about:

"And when old words die out on the tongue,
new melodies break forth from the heart;
and where the old tracks are lost,
new country is revealed with its wonders."

After all, what on earth can Christianity mean – especially when it descends into exclusiveness and worthiness tests - if it is not first about people's loving, saving intimacy with the Gracious Mother from whom they first emerged, and together, towards whom they are always intuitively stumbling? Beyond worn words and routine rites, only the 'fully-alive' human beings of Irenaeus - the light in their eyes and the love in their hearts - will ever be that 'catching influence' for others, those 'love-letters' to the world, God's ultimate valentine to all of creation – 'You are my body, my very blood'.