

Daniel's Reflection for week beginning 21st May 'Lost but for Words'

*We met under a shower of bird notes
Fifty years passed, love's moment
in a world of servitude to time.
She was young; I kissed with my eyes closed
and opened them on her wrinkles.*

From A Marriage by RS Thomas

Tucked away in some part of our soul there will be a precious memory of a season of love. It may have been in our childhood, our teenage years or last August, but one moment will always be special. Even if our love will pass away, as RS Thomas puts it, 'with one sigh no heavier than a feather' the memory will stay fresh, etched into our hearts forever. At such times the language of love comes naturally to us.

Without this language, received or given, the silence cries out. After mass at Newcastle Cathedral last month a young man waited for a word with me. In his hand he held a copy of a book I had signed for him a few years earlier at the request of a friend. 'With lots of love,' I had written. 'I just want to thank you,' he said earnestly. 'No one ever wrote or said those words to me. It was making me ill. And I hadn't even known him. How fearful and slow we are to talk lovingly. And yet our best words of love have all the power of God to reveal the unique and divine truth in each one. When a lover says to the beloved, 'You are beautiful', the grateful reply, 'You have made me so', is often made. To be sure, there is a sense in which this is true. But it is not the whole truth. What happens, I think, is that we draw out and reveal the beauty already there within another. We create the circumstances for the shy and frightened loveliness in the other to emerge. We then become catalysts of transcendence. When we are awake to our own beauty, we open the eyes of the sleeping beauty in another. This is the most sacred, sacramental moment. Our truest, total presence to all that is around us is the language of love.

A kind of dance goes on in the language of love. Whether with words or gestures we are weaving what Michael O'Siadhail calls 'a fragile city. Love is a flow, a giving and a receiving. 'To keep the right balance between closeness and distance,' wrote Henry Nouwen, 'requires hard work, especially since the needs of each person may be quite different at a given time. One might want to be held while the other looks for independence. A perfect balance seldom occurs, but the honest and open search for that balance can give birth to a beautiful dance worthy to behold.'

All our teaching will be sterile until it springs from a full heart. Three times Jesus so tenderly drew out the fullness of Peter's thrice denied love before entrusting to him the immense work of nourishing God's people, all peoples. Only when Peter had his love for his great friend restored did Jesus feel that he was ready to teach. Mark Van Doren wrote a poem about the teacher he remembered most: It must unfold as grace, inevitably, necessarily, As tomcats stretch: in such a way he lolled upon his desk and fell in love again before our very eyes again, again - how many times again!- with Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton's Satan as if his shameless, glad, compelling love were all he really wanted us to learn.

It is only when the language of knowledge and the language of love come together that lives are transformed. Loving, in fact, comes before knowing, not after it. You cannot really know something if you do not first love it. 'Only the heart knows in the full sense of the word,' Karl Rahner writes. Really interior knowledge, knowledge that grasps something completely and is more than a list of facts, is knowledge of the heart, the human centre which knows by experience and by suffering - the human centre where spirit and body, light and love dwell undivided in one chasm. In the final analysis, knowledge is but the radiance of love.'

(Unmasking God p68)