

My View — The God who Loves

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Of recent years as I have been growing older, I have had the habit of reading poetry most nights before going to bed. One of the poets who has absorbed my interest of late has been RS Thomas — a priest of the Anglican Church in Wales. He died more than twenty years ago, and over his life he published close to a thousand poems, fortunately nearly all succinct, and also tantalising and especially, challenging. Not surprisingly for a priest, he wrote often of his relationship with the mystery of God, expressing his frustration at what he experienced as the regular “absence” of God. And yet, he seemed to have remained faithful all his life to his prayer. He was a living example of one who could distinguish faith and trust from experience and feelings.

As Christians, we believe that the mystery of God is the mystery of Being and also of Love. Whenever we think or speak of God, however, our words [and experiences, if any] inevitably fall short. Constrained by our humanness, we necessarily think of everything in the familiar limited categories of time and space. The divine, however, is infinite and eternal. We cannot directly conceive of God, imagine God or feel God. The closest we can get is through analogy or metaphor.

We believe God to be the source of our existence, of our “being”. At every moment of our lives, God is sustaining us, creating each one of us — individually. We believe this; we trust this. That we do trust and believe is eminently reasonable; but like so many important things in life, we cannot empirically prove it. In the process God is totally aware of and alert to everything about us — our every thought, word and deed. Depending on what we believe about God, that constant awareness can seem intrusive or scary — or immensely reassuring.

As Christian believers, we believe that God loves every creature — no exceptions. In the First Letter of St. John [1John 4.8] in the Christian Scriptures, we read, “God is love”. The precise nature of God’s love is beyond our direct knowledge or understanding. Though the import of the word we use is necessarily “analogical”, divine love will certainly be infinitely more than the most mature human love.

With mature persons, love means something much richer than it meant when they were children. Children will love the ones who are good to them. With maturely free persons, their love will be measured by their own readiness to love, not by the worthiness or otherwise of the ones they love. Mature persons love because they are good, not because the ones they love are good. Their love is ultimately unconditional. Mature parents can continue to love even when their children’s behaviour hurts them deeply.

Similarly with God — God loves because God is good. God’s love is unconditional. It is pure gift. It is totally unmerited. We are loved whether we are sinners or saints. And unconditional love is strongly life-giving. To the extent that we recognise and accept God’s love for us, our own love begins to change and grow. We want to love God. Slowly we recognise and even come to rejoice that God loves everyone else as much as God loves us.

This is the God we engage with whenever we pray, whether we realise it or not. But when we do realise it, our praying can become a peaceful, simple acceptance of God’s gracious love for us. We do not do the work, as it were. The initiative is always God’s. We need not feel fervent, we need not feel anything; we can let go of our urge to think of God correctly. We may find ourselves easily distracted, perhaps even fall asleep. All we need do when we find ourselves distracted or asleep is peacefully to empty our selves once more and let God love this “distracted me” that I inevitably seem to be. And that takes practice. The First Letter of St John [1John 4.10] wisely commented: What matters most is “not our love for God, but God’s love for us.”