

# love of transformation

a sermon preached on the

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at

*st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Acts 10.44-48, Psalm 98, 1 John 5.1-12, John 15.9-17

While Mark's famous text might best summarise the position in relation to Torah – “You shall love (**αγαπησεις** *agapēseis*) the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength... You shall love your neighbour as yourself”<sup>1</sup> - there can be little doubt that John's fifteenth chapter must surely be the most exalted and exquisite words about the nature of this love: “Abide in me as I abide in you... As the Father has loved (**αγαπησεν** *agapēsen*) me, so I have loved you; abide in my love... This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this to lay down one's life for one's friends.”<sup>2</sup>

In Greek there are three words all translated by the single English word ‘love’. The particular Greek word John uses here is **αγαπη** *agapē* – a non erotic, non filial, kind of self-emptying. While there are obvious reasons for *eros*, the love of passion, and *phileo*, the love of reciprocity – in which there is some kind of self-interest – there is no obvious reason for the kind of ‘dis-interested’ self-emptying love expressed by this word *agapē*. This love makes no sense from the point of view of the world's commerce.

Though the gospels were written in Greek, the first language of Jesus and his disciples was Aramaic. Thus, we may not be aware that the word **αγαπη** *agapē* is a translation from an Aramaic thought world. There are two Aramaic words which are translated into the Greek scriptures as ‘love’: *rehem* רחם, and *hab* הב. *Rehem* is from an old word for ‘womb’ – that gestative capacity of moistness, fecundity, darkness, warmth and compassion which can pour forth from the depths of oneself. *Hab* is from the word meaning to kindle a fire from something easily set ablaze; or to grow or produce something slowly from an enclosure or from a secret place.<sup>3</sup> The seed which falls into the earth and dies, and which bears rich fruit,<sup>4</sup> is such a form of love.

The other ‘secret place’ enclosure within the human person much discussed by many of the great teachers in the Christian tradition is the heart. In the secret place of the heart – rather than in the rational intellect of the head – the fire of love blazes. The blazing fire of the love of the heart is that fire which hopes all things, endures all things, transforms all things.

With that in mind we can see that the nature of the relationship between Jesus and the Father – and into which Jesus the Christ invites the disciple – is clearly not a moral or legal code. In spite of it being called a new ‘commandment’,<sup>5</sup> what we have here transcends the commandments on Moses' tablets of stone. The capacity for this intimacy – this abiding one in the other – is womb-like warmth, moistness, darkness, fecundity, and the fire of love; something growing in secret, falling into the depths of the earth, dying.

It's not surprising, then, that so many of my attempts at ‘love’ tended to be somewhat forced, artificial, not born of the inner womb, nor of the blazing fire of transformation. For I tried to ‘love’ as an act of will, as a moral-ethical act. True, sometimes such actions may have been genuinely creative and beneficial to others. Yet it is painfully clear to me now that they lacked the necessary womb of compassion – the growing in secret in the depths of suffering and dying – and that having no deep roots, readily withered in the heat and harshness of life's assaults.

So we cannot ‘make ourselves’ into this kind of lover – merely by act of will or determination. And in fact, it is not a matter of our heroic choosing in any case: “You did not choose me but I chose you.”<sup>6</sup> If it were our choice, we could claim all the credit, which would be merely another form of

<sup>1</sup> Mark 12:30-31

<sup>2</sup> John 15:4,9,12,13

<sup>3</sup> Douglas-Klotz N, *The Hidden Gospels: Decoding the Spiritual Message of the Aramaic Jesus*, Wheaton: Quest Books, 2001, p117, 143, 195.

<sup>4</sup> John 12:24

<sup>5</sup> John 15:10,12,17

<sup>6</sup> John 15:16

spiritual inflation. No, this womb-like compassion is called forth from us – when we least intend, when we least expect, when we least feel able so to do. Though of course our active and conscious contribution is required – to willingly participate, and to resist the temptation to avoid what will be the necessary suffering.

And thus chosen, the One who does the calling completely turns upside down the conventional economy of relational dynamics: “I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything I have heard from my Father.”<sup>7</sup> We become one with Christ, one with the Father, one with God indeed, in the degree to which we ourselves become the womb from which compassion and warmth can blaze. And this is nothing less than what the Eastern Christian traditions call *theosis*, becoming like God. This is the work of the Spirit who blows where she will.

Resurrection faith does not consist in believing impossible things about some 2000 year old happenings in the Ancient Near East. Rather, resurrection faith is about God bearing – becoming the womb in which warmth and compassion and the fire of love gestate; fire indeed which transforms both us and the world. We are not here to become model citizens. Rather, we are here to be completely transformed in the fire of Love – our very selves offered as eucharistic action.

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