



Love: a Christian reflection

Written by The Reverend Dr James Hawkey,
Canon Theologian



Thank you for downloading this resource. We hope that it will be a useful teaching tool in your classroom.

As we continue to grow our free catalogue of teaching resources, we'd really appreciate a few minutes of your time to let us know what you liked and what could be improved. Please complete this [five-question survey](#).

Most of us know intuitively what it is like to love or to have been loved. That sense of being totally, perhaps even unconditionally, committed to someone else, to their protection, and their happiness. Many human relationships contain something of this love, even if they're not often unconditional or completely selfless. We sometimes think of marriage, life-long partnership, or intentional lives of service, as demonstrating a way of life which doesn't just revolve around 'me'. Love frequently puts the centre of our lives somewhere else. By definition, it is unselfish.

Christians believe that love comes from God. Jesus's apostle St John is sometimes known as the Beloved Disciple, as he is believed to have had an especially close friendship with Jesus. In a letter he wrote after Jesus's resurrection, St John says very straightforwardly,

God is love.

1 John 4: 16

John helps us to discern what does – and what doesn't – come from God. Love always comes from God, and those who love one another *live* in God, St John tells us. In fact, he goes on, it is through genuinely loving that we are able to *see* God. So, in telling us about love, he also tells us something about God – if God is love, God is the source of love. When we share love with one another, that act is not first and foremost an energy or feeling of our own. Instead, when we love we share in the life of God, in the kind of relationship that God wills and himself shares with us. St John writes,

In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us

1 John 4: 10

As students of Aristotle or Aquinas will know (especially if they've studied the Cosmological Argument for God's existence), God is the *first mover*. Before we ever loved anyone or anything, God loved *us* through the act of creation. The depth of God's overwhelming love for us is demonstrated by sending his Son, that act of supreme generosity and self-giving. Christians do not believe God to be a distant figure. Rather, God

is Trinity – three persons, one God. God is perfect relationship, in which Father, Son and Holy Spirit, live in absolutely pure and total self-gift.

So, following that pattern, true love will always be a kind of giving-away, a generosity, even a delight. The 14th century German mystic, Meister Eckhardt, wrote,

“When the Father laughs at the Son and the Son laughs back at the Father, that laughter gives pleasure, that pleasure gives joy, that joy gives love, and that love is the Holy Spirit.”

Love is what makes God truly God. Of course, in our human experience, love takes various forms, and the English language is quite limited in expressing this. The classical Greek world was far more precise, and used quite a few words for different kinds of love. In particular, Christians often use three of these words to consider what love means in different situations: *philia* is the kind of affectionate love shared between sisters and brothers, or close friends; *eros* is an erotic love, characterised by sexual desire or romantic attraction; and *agape* is that unchangeable, unbreakable, unconditional love which we see in God. Each of these kinds of love involves risk and vulnerability, including the possibility of rejection. The great Christian author C. S. Lewis wrote a book called *The Four Loves*. In it, he writes,

“To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket – safe, dark, motionless, airless – it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable... The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell.”¹

Love is not a series of warm feelings, or a guarantee that everything will end up OK. Love requires commitment, handing over part of yourself to another and that comes with risk. In the Gospels, Jesus is quite honest about this. It cost him everything. In fact, he makes it very clear,

No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

John 15: 13

Over the Great West Door of Westminster Abbey, stand statues of ten 20th century Christians who each have something to teach us about love. One of them is St Maximilian Kolbe, a Franciscan priest from Poland who gave his life for another prisoner at Auschwitz. His story is simple but profound. In 1941, a prisoner escaped from the camp, and the Commandant decided that ten men would be starved to death in order to deter others from attempting to flee. One of these ten men, Franciszek Gajowniczek, cried out for his wife and children. Maximilian calmly offered to take his place. He was the last of the ten to die, and gave his life in place of a stranger. Maximilian was declared to be a saint in 1982. Over a decade later, Franciszek Gajowniczek told an audience in the USA through a translator that "so long as he ... has breath in his lungs, he would consider it his duty to tell people about the heroic act of love by Maximilian Kolbe."

To paraphrase St Paul,² love is patient, kind, not jealous or boastful, not puffed-up or self-seeking; it is not easily provoked or conscious of past mistakes; it rejoices in the truth, and never fails. At the end of all

¹ C. S. Lewis *The Four Loves* p. 169

² See 1 Corinthians 13 for St Paul's beautiful 'hymn' to love.

things, love will survive. That's why love is right at the very heart of everything Christians have to say about God.

Speaking to his friends on the night before he died, Jesus said,

This is my commandment, that you love one another.

John 15: 12

Prayer

O God, in whom nothing can live but as it lives in love, grant us the spirit of love which does not want to be rewarded, honoured or esteemed, but only to become the blessing and happiness of everything that longs for it; love which is the very joy of life, and your own goodness and truth within the soul; for you are Love, and by love our Redeemer, dear Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.