

the love her knowledge had started burning. In It was the truth of God's loving care. In It, finally, was she washed, and made whiter than snow.

—Francis Bailie, O.P.

LOVE IN THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS

The Harlot

IN THE BEGINNING of the Lord's speaking to Osee, the Lord said to Osee: "Go, take a harlot wife and harlot's children, for the land gives itself to harlotry, turning away from the Lord."

So he went and took Gomer, the daughter of Debelaim, and she conceived and bore him a son. Then the Lord said to him:

Give him the name Jezrael,
for in a little while
I will punish the house of Jehu
for the bloodshed at Jezrael
And bring to an end the kingdom
of the house of Israel;
On that day I will break the bow of Israel
in the valley of Jezrael.

When she conceived again and bore a daughter, the Lord said to him:

Give her the name Lo-ruhama;
I no longer feel pity for the house of Israel:
rather, I abhor them utterly.

Yet for the house of Juda I feel pity;
I will save them by the Lord, their God;
But I will not save them by war,
By sword or bow, by horses or horsemen.

After she weaned Lo-ruhamah, she conceived and bore a son. Then the Lord said:

Give him the name Lo-ammi,
for you are not my people,
and I will not be your God.

(*Osee* 1:2-9)

A terrible curse upon the Kingdom of Israel. For more than 200 years the Kingdom of the chosen people had been split in two: Judah and Israel. Things had gone from bad to worse in Israel. It was a sombre period in her long and tragic history. Ten years before she had been conquered by the Assyrians; violent interior revolts raged incessantly; four of her kings had been assassinated in cold blood in less than five years; corruption was eating away the religious and moral foundations of the kingdom.

This is the crumbling world into which Osee the prophet was born. He grew to manhood, fell passionately in love with a young woman of the kingdom and married her. But she left him to pursue a life of harlotry in the streets of the city. Osee continued to love Gomer, was willing to forgive her faithlessness and take her back. Among the Jews this was unthinkable; the adulteress was usually taken beyond the city gates and stoned to death. But Osee is a prophet whose actions symbolize Yahweh's conduct toward his chosen people. The prophet must take back the harlot, for only by such a degrading and stupid union can a true picture of Yahweh's relations with Israel be drawn.

With astounding daring and burning passion, Osee's tender and violent love expresses for the first time Yahweh's dealings with Israel in the language of a marriage. The theme of the message is the misunderstood and long-suffering love of Yahweh for his people. Israel was once young and won the affection of Yahweh in her youth. It was the hand of Yahweh that helped her to walk; he drew her with cords of love. Except for a short period in the desert, Israel had responded to the advances of Yahweh with nothing but treason and betrayal. Her kings, chosen against the will of Yahweh, degraded the *chosen* people to the rank of *other* people. It was her ignorant and greedy priests who led the people to defeat. The cult of Yahweh at Bethel had become associated with the licentious worship of Baal and Ashtarte. But Yahweh is a jealous God who cannot bear to lose His chosen people; He wants their hearts, not their empty sacrifices. "What I want is love, not sacrifices; the knowledge of God, not holocausts" (*Osee* 6:6).

Israel's punishment is inevitable. But God punishes only that He might

save. Punished and humiliated, Israel will recall how it used to be when she was faithful, Yahweh will take back His repentant people who will enjoy His favor and peace once again.

Therefore, I will hedge her in with thorns
and erect a wall against her
so that she cannot find her paths.
If she runs after her lovers, she shall not overtake them;
if she looks for them she shall not find them.
Then she shall say,
"I will go back to my first husband,
for it was better with me then than now."

So I will allure her;
I will lead her into the desert
and speak to her heart.
From there I will give her the vineyards she had,
and the valley of Achor as a door of hope.
She shall respond there as in the days of her youth,
when she came up from the land of Egypt.

On that day, says the Lord,
She shall call me "My husband,"
and never again "My baal."
Then will I remove from her mouth the names of the Baals,
so that they shall no longer be invoked.
I will make a covenant for them on that day,
with the beasts of the field,
With the birds of the air,
and with the things that crawl on the ground.
Bow and sword and war
I will destroy from the land,
and I will let them take their rest in security.
I will espouse you to me forever:
I will espouse you in right and justice,
in love and in mercy;
I will espouse you in fidelity,
and you shall know the Lord.

On that day I will respond, says the Lord;
I will respond to the heavens,
and they shall respond to the earth;
The earth shall respond to the grain and wine and oil,
and these shall respond to Jezrael.
I will sow him for myself in the land,
and I will have pity on Lo-ruhama.
I will say to Lo-ammi, "You are my people,"
and he shall say, "My God!"

(*Osee 2:8-25*)

When Osee represents Yahweh as a man wooing an unworthy woman in defiance of convention, law and reason, he shows that no legal formulas can adequately describe God's relationship with His people. He himself must love his adulterous wife as Yahweh loves the children of Israel, showing that the official religion had collapsed long ago and that Israel was held in existence only by an unfathomable divine love which to normal understanding must appear grotesque. He pulls down the theory of the Covenant in order to expose God's love as its foundation.

In the hour of Israel's self-prepared doom, when it seemed that Yahweh must turn his just wrath into action and cast off His people forever, the love of God breaks through with loud complaint:

How could I give you up, O Ephraim,
or deliver you up, O Israel?
My heart is overwhelmed,
my pity is stirred.
I will not give vent to my blazing anger,
I will not destroy Ephraim again;
For I am God and not man,
The Holy One present among you;
I will not let the flames consume you.

Here is love that surpasses all our puny, human notions about love; here, love has its highest expression in Old Testament literature. Divine love is not swayed by fear of the consequences or by motives of revenge; it operates irresistibly. But when it meets opposition in His people's lovelessness, when He finds their loyalty to be as the morning cloud and as the dew that goes early away, God can be said to suffer. Face to face with sin He may be said to experience something like the feeling of helplessness: "What

can I do with you Ephraim? What can I do with you, Juda?" (*Osee* 6:4). It is the suffering love of Yahweh that gives such poignancy to Osee's pronouncements of doom; it brings out the depths of his desolation when he says: "Because of their wicked deeds I will drive them out of my house. I will love them no longer." If taken literally these words would mean that God intended to be God no longer, which is an utter impossibility, for God is love.

Osee's pronouncements are not without mystery. God's love is pure, without the slightest shadow or change. He cannot suffer or feel sorrow at the lack of love on the part of His creatures. Yet He says that his heart is overwhelmed, his pity stirred. How can this be?

The Crucified

It is even more mysterious when we turn to the New Testament and read in the First Epistle of St. John:

In this has the love of God been shown in our case, that God has sent his only-begotten Son into the world that we may live through him. In this is the love, not that we have loved God, but that he has first loved us, and sent his Son a propitiation for our sins (*1 John* 4: 9-10).

God sends His beloved Son into the world as a propitiation for our sins, to empty Himself and become the servant of all, to live the humiliating and often painful life of a human, to suffer and die strung up on a cross. The Father knew all this when He sent His Son forth on His mission, but how could He do this without His heart being overwhelmed, without His pity being stirred? Again, God's love does not count the cost, it stops at nothing in giving, even to the giving of what He loves most: His completely lovable Son. We cannot imagine such love.

We know of course that God is the infinitely perfect Being, Who can receive nothing from His creatures. Yet we cannot imagine His love being motivated by selfish needs; all divine activity that has to do with His creatures must be for the creature's good. Perhaps we think at times that our loves are pure and selfless, but how often they have a hidden motive, the need to be loved, the seeking for some return. That is why it is so difficult for us to grasp the mystery of God's love; it is so alien to our own.

That is why God has used such moving language in *Osee* and in the Gospels to help us picture His love for us, how like it is to a consuming fire that sweeps away all before it. It is outrageous for God to liken His love for his people to Osee's love for the harlot. It staggers the mind to

think that God would send His own Son to suffer and die out of love for us. The language of Osee is preposterous; the Incarnation of Christ defies words. But gifts are the language of love. What greater gift could God give us than His Son? This is the kind of giving that only Infinite Love could devise.

The Response

The dynamism of love demands something in return. And the demand was made known to the chosen people in the earliest days of their dialogue with Yahweh:

Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. Therefore you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength. Take to heart these words which I enjoin on you today. Drill them into your children. Speak of them at home and abroad, whether you are busy or at rest. Bind them at your wrist as a sign and let them be a pendant on your forehead. Write them on the doorposts of your houses and on your gates (*Dt. 6:4-9*).

You shall not bear hatred for your brother in your heart. Though you may have to reprove your fellow man, do not incur sin because of him. Take no revenge and cherish no grudge against your fellow countrymen. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord (*Lev. 19:17-18*).

The Jewish people understood the demands of this love. They knew that it would involve suffering and even martyrdom if they loved God with their whole selves. The Rabbinical tradition is quite clear on this point. Suffering is for the correction of those whom the Lord loves; it is the testing by fire of our love for God and His Law. Only through suffering can man prove that He loves God for His own sake and not for any selfish motive.

When dealing with man's love of his neighbor, Jewish thought takes another turn. Love of God is perfected in suffering; love of one's neighbor is perfected in the giving of practical help. To practice love means to perform acts of kindness. This love is not based on human love between men, but on God's love for men; it is in imitation of divine behavior. Love is the divine principle ordained for the relations between God, I and thou; and it must be maintained in constant control or the relationship is ruined. But first and last it is God who maintains the principle. It is Esdras who finally realized that the whole world would fall apart if God were to measure by righteousness and not by love.

This total demand of love could not have its full range and scope without destroying the average Jew's view of God, of the world, and of

life itself. So great words about love remained a dead letter. In spite of all, righteousness continued to be the foundation of Jewish theology and ethics. It remained for Jesus to come and break down the barriers:

And behold, a certain lawyer got up to test him, saying, "Master, what must I do to gain eternal life?" But he said to him, "What is written in the law? How do you read?" He answered and said, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, and with thy whole soul, and with thy whole strength, and with thy whole mind. . . . (*Luke 10:25-27*).

Jesus stands clearly in the line of Jewish ethical thought. But his demand for love is so exclusive that it becomes the final test of righteousness; all other commandments are included in it. He is so forthright and so demanding in this business of love that his listeners become discouraged and leave him. But he is adamant: "No can can serve two masters; either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will stand by the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon" (*Matt. 6:24*). To love God means to serve him, obey his orders faithfully, submit to him without care or anxiety, trusting him in the face of suffering and persecution, leaving all things to his providence. Suffering can be a stumbling-block, but once it is understood that it is the only way to prove our love for God, that it is a sign of God's love for us, it loses its sting. Love overcomes all things.

The Samaritan

. . . and thy neighbor as thyself.

And he said to him,

"Thou hast answered rightly; do this and thou shalt live."

But he, wishing to justify himself, said to Jesus,

"And who is my neighbor?"

Jesus answered,

"A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell in with robbers, who after stripping him and beating him went their way, leaving him half dead.

But as it happened, a certain priest was going down the same way, and when he saw him he passed by. And likewise a Levite also, when he was near the place and saw him passed by.

But a certain Samaritan as he journeyed came upon him, and seeing him was moved with compassion. And he went up to him and bound his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. And setting him on

his beast, he brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the inn-keeper and said,

"Take care of him; and whatever more thou spendest, I, on my way back, will repay thee."

"Which of these three, in thy opinion, proved himself neighbor to him who fell among the robbers?"

And he said,

"He who took pity on him."

And Jesus said to him,

"Go and do thou in like manner."

(*Luke 10:27-36*)

Love of God is the great fundamental demand of Jesus, but the second, love of neighbor, is like it. It means rather simply that we must love our neighbor as ourself . . . not more than ourself, not less. The story of the Samaritan does away with any idea that it is mere organized philanthropy that is demanded; personal interest is required. The center is no longer "I," but "Thou." And this love cannot be applied mechanically to every situation; it has to be applied in the concrete and circumstances will vary, but it means that the readiness to help must come to the fore when the occasion demands. The Samaritan was moved with compassion; he did what was required and made provision for the immediate future . . . nothing more, nothing less. "Go and do thou in like manner."

The Enemy

You have heard that it was said, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor and shall hate thy enemy."

But I say to you, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who persecute and calumniate you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, who makes his sun to rise on the good and the evil, and sends rain on the just and the unjust.

For if you love those who love you, what reward shall you have? Do not even the publicans do that? And if you salute your brethren only, what are you doing more than the others? Do not even the Gentiles do that?

You therefore are to be perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect.

(*Matt. 5:43-48*)

Love of our enemies. Here is where Jesus parts company with the tradition of the Jews. Love of God, love of neighbor, yes, but isn't love of one's enemy asking the impossible? Yet, the demand is made. We must love where we can expect nothing in return, go against all that is merely human, love with boundless generosity. This involves a kind of martyrdom of self that goes beyond anything that the Jewish Law prescribed. This is what sets Christian love apart. Jesus knows very well what the world is like, and how reluctant the human heart is to respond to such a thankless task. It is the call to live the life of perfect love in a world that has forgotten such a sublime vocation. It is utterly beyond our human capacities. How can we do it?

His Love

Beloved, if God has so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God. If we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us (1 *John* 4:11-12).

"And *his* love is perfected in us." This is the heart of the mystery, the end of the search. The demands of love that Jesus makes are impossible of fulfillment if we rely on our own capacities for love. Realizing our merely human drives and inclinations, we know that we are incapable of loving those who hate us, in fact we are often seemingly incapable of loving those who love us. It is only as children of God, brothers of Jesus, that we can hope to love as Christ expects us to love. It is with God's own love that we love. By participating in the divine life of God Himself, united to Him in great intimacy through Jesus, then we can begin to love. God offers us this participation in the love which is His life, by sending us His Son; through our union with Christ we can live this life of love. It can only come from God since it is the divine life itself.

It is God's love that must become perfect in us. Our love must become more and more God-like. Osee has shown us that this love is at times an outraged and suffering love, an irresistible love, moving at times in defiance of convention, law and reason. So must our's be. It can only happen if we submit ourselves completely and irrevocably to God's love, being unmindful as best we can be, of suffering and outrage and hurt. We must continue to go out to others in their need, not counting the cost, even to loving Christ in those who hate or hurt us. When God becomes the ground of our being, our only hope, we begin to stop counting the cost. We begin to become perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect.

—J. D. Campbell, O.P.