

Today's second reading is St Paul's ravishing poem to love; it is a hymn, a poem to divine love; it is mystical; its beauty lies in its simplicity of expression.

And there was absolutely no way he could live up to it:

In this reading he says: "Love is patient and kind (...) Love is not easily angered, it bears no grudges" (13:4-5)

But in his second letter to Timothy, he says very angrily: "Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds." (4:14)

Even after receiving the grace to write his mystical poem to love, he still thought that God would punish the coppersmith for his misdeeds.

This is one of the most entrenched ideas in the human psyche and one most difficult to free ourselves from: that God (or maybe life) punishes us for our sins and rewards us for the good we do. If our morality is based on reward and punishment, or if our understanding of God is a God who rewards and punishes, then our morality and our understanding of God are both hopelessly skewed.

I'm quite certain that sooner or later every negative thought, word or deed brings a negative consequence – but this is a law

of life and has nothing to do with punishment. If I thrust my hand into the fire it will be burnt – that is just cause and effect, it has nothing to do with punishment.

Well then, if there's no good rewarded and no bad punished, why do with bother? What's the point?

The point is that each one of us – as unlikely as it might sometimes seem – was brought into existence by God for a single purpose: that we should be eternally one with him, beyond all time and forever, in a union – a not-twoness – of love. Love was the beginning of our existence, and God wills that love will be the summation of it. The final destiny of the creature is to be eternally united with the Creator so that each can see and know and love themselves in the other. An eternal mutual beholding. That's why it's worth bothering and that's the point: love.

Christ commands us to love one another, and for most of us, that can seem even more difficult than believing God doesn't reward or punish us: but actually, it's only difficult if we make the mistake of thinking that loving other people involves our feelings – that is, *feeling* loving toward them. It doesn't. Christ told us to love one another – he didn't say that we have to *like*

one another. Liking is a matter of feelings, but love is always an act of will. It may *affect* the feelings and the body – it nearly always does – but it doesn't *begin* there. It begins in the will. I can't will myself to like others, but I can will myself to love them. To love another is to account the being and life of that other as important as one's own. That's why Jesus said: "Love your neighbour *as yourself*." Someone who has no love for themselves will never have any love for others.

I might loath the sight of a particular person, but if he was in terrible trouble and asked for my help, and if I gave it willingly – then no matter what I felt about him, I would be loving him. Or if one night I saw him drowning in the canal and I jumped in and saved him, then whatever I felt about him personally, I would be loving him. Love is always first and foremost an act of will and to love another person is always to will that other person's good. This is exactly the love that God has for us: a love that wills our ultimate and everlasting good. Our everlasting good is a timeless union with him, in which each sees, knows and loves themselves in the other.