

One of the most entrenched ideas – and one most difficult to free ourselves from – is that God punishes us for our sins and rewards us for the good we do. ‘Now what have I done?’ we cry, when troubles come our way. Of course, there are certain Christians (and those of other faiths) of a particular mindset, who take an indecent relish in the belief that God experiences a similar *frisson* when he punishes us for our wrongdoing. The wrongdoing is usually disobedience of some kind; rather than a failure in love, it is a transgression against the law. Yet 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 woefully inadequate. In her *Revelations of Divine Love*, the medieval mystic Julian of Norwich said: “And when I looked, I saw that there was no anger in the divine nature; rather, the anger was all in ourselves.” It takes a woman’s heart to know this.

So why bother? If there’s no good to be rewarded and no bad to be punished, what’s the point? Well, I’m quite sure that sooner or later every negative thought, word or deed brings a negative consequence – but this is a spiritual law of life and has nothing to do with divine punishment. We reap what we sow. If I thrust my hand into the fire, it will be burned. If I leap from the top of a multi-storey car park, I will fall and be killed. If I live a selfish, unloving or unethical life, I will suffer the

effects of this; ‘When?’ we cry, looking around at the state of the world and the wickedness running rampant in it. Although the question is left unanswered, we can be sure of two things: i) it is inevitable, and ii) we punish ourselves. God has nothing to do with it. Sometimes one has to struggle to cling on to this idea, faced with the image of a frequently belligerent God in the Old Testament, who in Exodus 20:6 says:

“I, Yahweh your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and on the fourth generation of those who hate me, and showing loving kindness to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.”

I simply cannot believe this – at least not the first part of it. I prefer the illumined wisdom of Julian of Norwich. I also remind myself for the umpteenth time that the Old Testament is not really about God, but more about a people’s *understanding* of God – which at times is fairly primitive. This applies to all of us; the 18th century French philosopher Voltaire once said:

“In the beginning God created man in His own image, and man has been trying to repay the favour ever since.”

The less love there is in our image and understanding of God, the harder we will find it to even begin to follow Christ’s first commandment: ‘Love one another.’ If our idea is of a judge who rewards and punishes, this is more-or-less what our attitude to others

will be; if, on the other hand, we cherish faith in a God who not only loves but whose being is indistinguishable from love, we will take to heart the Lord Jesus' command to love one another.

Each one of us – as unlikely as it might sometimes seem – was brought into existence for a particular reason: that we should be eternally one with God, beyond all time and forever, in a union of love. Love was the beginning of our existence, and God wills that love shall 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. This is precisely why it is worth bothering – and this is precisely the point of it all: love.

For most of us, loving our neighbour – loving one another – can *seem* even more difficult than believing that God doesn't reward or punish us; but this is only if we misunderstand what kind of love Jesus is taking about. Unfortunately, in English at any rate, the word 'love' is used so often about so many things, it's lost virtually all meaning; we can love chocolate, or a series on Netflix, or our cat or dog, we can love a celebrity or our granny or the latest Ed Sheeran release. On the other hand, in the language that Jesus spoke, Aramaic, the word for love is *hoo-bah* and although it has many nuances and applications, its essential meaning is 'to set aflame' or 'to warm'. They certainly wouldn't have used it about the 1st century equivalent of Ed Sheeran or

chocolate. The Greeks have about five words for love, each of them having a very specific meaning. Our poverty of language means that sometimes we don't realise what kind of love the Lord Jesus is talking about. The closest to it in Greek would be *Agape*: an overflowing love that seeks nothing in return. It is the love of God operating in and from the human heart. It is not sentimental or emotional. Simply put, it is the surrender of mind and heart to the truth that every person – even the lowliest and (for whatever reason) the most despised – is of infinite value in the eyes of God and is loved by him no less and no more than we ourselves are. If the destiny of every living being – from a blade of grass to a far-flung galaxy – is to be eternally united with the Creator so that each can see and know and love themselves in the other, then living our life in the light of this truth is what loving our neighbour means. If we can see and hear God in a rose, or a lark, a concerto, or a pink-and-gold sunset, how much more should we be able to see him in a homeless drunk slumped in a shop doorway? This is what *Agape* is: cherishing the other without judgement simply because it has been willed into existence by the same Love that caused us to be. It is seeing and living it out.

This has nothing to do with *liking* anyone. Liking – a far better word to use about chocolate and Ed Sheeran – is a sort of nice feeling. *Agape* is not a feeling at all, but an act of will. I can't will myself to like

people, but I can will myself to love them. Actually, loving is far easier than liking.

I might loath the sight of Mr X; I might pray every night that he would sell his house and move to south-east Anatolia. But if he was in terrible trouble and asked for my help, and if I gave it willingly – no matter what I *felt* about him – then 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. To love another person is always to will that other person's good, and this is the love that God has for us: he wills our everlasting good; and our everlasting good is the gift of himself.