

In Greek there are eight words for love: Eros (sexual love), Philia (deep friendship), Ludus (playful friendship), Agape (love one's fellow human beings), Pragma (long-standing, mature love), Philautia (healthy love of self), Storge (family love), Mania (obsessive love or infatuation).

In Sanskrit there are ninety-six, in Latin four and Arabic has at least five.

In English there is only one word: I love my wife, I love my husband; I love chocolate; I love long walks; I love my garden; I love my mother and father; I love Netflix; I love my children; I love sudoku. Just one word: the impoverishment is tragic.

Because how do we describe the love of God? We are so often told that God loves us - but does divine love bear any resemblance to any other kind? Not in the slightest. Our tragedy is that we have to use the same word for God as we do for chocolate.

God's love for us is so radical, so root-deep, it is ontological: this means that it is a love whose fullness belongs to *being*, in the very fact of our existence. God's love is not about who or what we are, but *that* we are. A love that is completely oblivious of how we look or what our circumstances are, how rich or poor, how 'holy' or not we may be – a love that pours itself into our being, our existence itself. And because God's love for us is not because of who or what we are, but simply *because* we are, it excludes nothing and no one; it is all-containing, all-embracing, limitless and

timeless. It has no boundaries whatsoever – it could never have boundaries without ceasing to be itself. This love is within us, at the centre of ourselves all the time, permanently, but there are so many things in our heart that shadow its presence. The Persian poet and mystic Jalal Rumi, said:

“Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it.”

Even to glimpse its unfailing presence is to have our souls opened, even if only a little – and a little is all that is needed. A modern writer has described it like this:

“It was like a like a tiny flame, one that could be easily overlooked but was eternally present. Like a moth drawn to light I followed it, until the idea of myself — of me, the individual person I thought of as me — began to melt away. No words can adequately describe this experience. I felt overwhelmingly whole, as if I was part of something that extended well beyond the conscious plane of existence. I went deeper and deeper...until I sensed the presence of the countenance of God.

“For the first time in my life I felt completely and unconditionally accepted. There was nothing that could break this bond. I didn’t need to ‘become’ anything or ‘prove’ my worth; I was already complete and whole. There was neither guilt nor shame. Any transgression was forgiven before I was even born. I was held as whole by a force that

was greater than anything I had ever known. I cried. I cried because I knew for the first time that I was unconditionally loved by God.

The truth is, everyone, every living thing is unconditionally loved by God.”

St Paul certainly caught a glimpse of it in some internal revelation that he expressed in his first letter to the Corinthians – one of the most famous passages in scripture about love. And he was quite unable to love up to it: his letters are sprinkled with impatience, resentment, self-pity and judgementalism. This should give all of us cause for hope.

To God there is no one and nothing that is unlovable. Unlovableness is a judgement that only human beings ever make – and it is shameful. God, his love for his creatures and the creatures themselves – including you and me – are not three separate things: they are three aspects of the same whole.

The medieval mystic Julian of Norwich was shown this by the Lord – even in the sin-and-hell obsessed 14<sup>th</sup> century – and she recorded it in her *Revelations of Divine Love*. She writes:

“From the time that it was shown I desired often to know what was our Lord’s meaning. And fifteen years after and more, I was answered in inward understanding, and he said: ‘Would you know your Lord’s meaning in this? Learn it well. Love was his meaning. Who showed it to you? Love.

Why did he show you? For love. Hold fast to this (...) and you will never need to know or understand anything again.’ Thus did I learn” (she says) “that love was our Lord’s meaning.

(...)

“And I saw full surely that before ever God made us, he loved us. And this love is never put out, nor ever shall be.”