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13

Amazing Love

So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

1 Jn 4:16

Down through the centuries men and women have been deeply touched by the redeeming love of God in Jesus Christ. Paul, the apostle, was a great witness. He prays in Ephesians “that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith”; and that “you would come to know the breadth and length and height and depth” of the love of Christ (Eph 3:17-19). This amazing love of Christ is most visible through the eyes of faith when we look upon the Cross of Jesus. Gazing upon the Cross, we can see the *height* of his love symbolized by the vertical beam reaching upwards. As the psalmist says, “his love reaches to the heavens.” He has opened heaven’s door for us, reconciled us with God, and won for us a “crown of righteousness” that awaits us, when we finally come to him in glory.

With our eyes still fixed on the Cross we can see the *depth* of Christ’s love, symbolized by the beam planted deep in the earth. Jesus loved us so much that he did not cling to his equality with God, but emptied himself, becoming one of us, born in a stable, and placed as an infant in a feeding trough for animals. His love went deeper still, emptying himself further, being crucified by the Romans as a common criminal. Lower than this it would seem he could not have gone. But then he emptied himself further by giving himself to us in the Eucharist under the appearance of bread and wine.

Now if we turn our gaze to the horizontal beam of the Cross,

we can feel in our hearts the *breadth* of his love. With his arms outstretched on this beam, he embraced every human being. With his Mother, and John the Beloved disciple, at the foot of the Cross, he entrusted every disciple to his Blessed Mother and gave her to each one of us. But his love goes beyond the inner circle of his beloved disciples. His saving love is universal in its reach. No one is excluded. His heart is big enough to offer a place for all men and women in the Father's house. There are no distinctions of gender, race, colour or creed. No matter whether wealthy or poor, sick or healthy, famous or unknown, success or a failure, he died for all. He came to seek out and save the lost; his heart on the Cross embraces the drug dealers, the prostitutes, the serial murderers, the rapists, the porn pushers, the pedophiles – he died for all.

As we look upon the Cross we will also discover the meaning of the *length* of his love. His love has *infinite* duration. It endures until the end of time; and beyond time *forever*. His love is everlasting. It has no end! He will never stop loving us, even if we reject him. He has irrevocably bound himself to us in love when he was nailed to the Cross for our sake. The covenant, which he will never break, was written in his blood, and carved on his hands and his feet and his side, forever. Now Risen, he still carries his wounds as a sign of his eternal love for us.

The Divine Bridegroom

When we say “yes” to the love of Jesus, lifted up on the Cross for our sins, and raised by the Father for our deliverance, he fills us with this love. Bernard of Clairvaux struggled to describe this experience, which is by definition indescribable:

When the Bridegroom, Christ the Word, came to me he never made any sign that he was coming; there was no sound of his voice, no glimpse of his face, no footfall. He made no movement by which I could identify his coming; none of my senses showed me that he

had flooded the depths of my being. Only by the warmth of my heart did I know that he was there. I knew the power of his might because my guilt and sin were wiped away and my body's yearnings were brought under control ... To those who have experienced this, I say: Relish it. To those of you who have not, I say: Burn with desire, that you might come to experience it.⁷⁴

From the ugliness of sin to the beauty of God

St Augustine encountered this love. He says, “You loved me when I was unlovable, and because you loved me you made me lovable”. However, it was only after a long journey of heartfelt searching that he finally yielded to God's love. As a young man he tried on the various ideologies of his day.⁷⁵ But they all failed him. He also was captive to “the bonds of illicit love.” But this did not satisfy his deepest desire. By God's providence he came under the preaching of Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, and was convicted by the truth of the word of God. But knowing the truth, he was still in bondage to the flesh. He found himself in bitter torment; knowing what he should do, but incapable of doing it. “I twisted and turned in my chain ... In my heart I kept saying, ‘let it be now, let it be now!’” He was on the point of resolution, but he could not do it. Weeping he cried out, “How long shall I go on saying ‘tomorrow’, ‘tomorrow’? Why not now? Why not make an end of ugly sins at this moment?” Then he heard the voice of a child singing: “Take and read; take and read!” Augustine took this as the voice of the Lord calling him to pick up the Bible that was nearby. It fell open to the words, “Let us cast off the armour of darkness and put on the armour of light ... Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” (Rom 13:13-14).

In that instant Augustine received from God the grace of conversion in his soul. He said, “the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled.” He was 33 years old, and now after a long search he had found the Lord. Rather,

the Lord had found him. In his Confessions, written in praise of God's love, he recalls the grace of conversion this way:

Late have I loved you, O Beauty so ancient and so new; late have I loved you! For behold you were within me, and I outside; and I sought you outside, and in my ugliness fell upon those lovely things that you have made. You were with me and I was not with you ... You called and cried to me and broke open my deafness; and you sent forth your beams and shone upon me and chased away my blindness: you breathed fragrance upon me, and I drew in my breath, and do now pant for you: I tasted you, and now hunger and thirst for you: you touched me, and I have burned for your peace.⁷⁶

From knowing to loving

There is a profound difference between knowing about Christ and *knowing* Christ. The first comes from acquired knowledge, the second from experience. Many scholars have studied the mysteries of the faith, and written profound treatises on what has been revealed in Jesus Christ. But at some point or other in everyone's journey, the Lord Jesus turns to the individual and looks into his or her eyes, asking the question he asked of his first disciples, "Who do you say I am?" Thomas Aquinas was one of the greatest theologians of the mediaeval times. He brilliantly synthesized the mysteries of faith, using the underpinning of newly found Aristotelian philosophy. We still rely upon his synthesis today. But his work was left unfinished. Towards the end of his life as he was praying before the Blessed Sacrament, he had a moment of mystical revelation of the Risen Christ. He did not write again. His secretary asked him why he stopped writing. Thomas replied, "All that I have written seems to me like so much straw compared to what I have seen and what has been revealed to me." Thomas had been taken more deeply than ever into the mystery of "the love of Christ which surpasses all knowledge" (Eph 3:19).

From being lukewarm to a heart on fire

Teresa of Avila came to know the fire of God's love within her soul like few others. But it had not always been so. She had for twenty years been trying to live a committed spiritual life. But she found the practice of prayer a tiresome chore. She had made little compromises in her life; her heart was divided between its allegiance to Christ and its attraction to worldly pleasures. Then one day, out of the blue, she received the gift of a "second conversion."⁷⁷ She was filled in a new way by the love of God. It happened like this. She was walking into the chapel one evening, as she had done for years. Her eyes fell on an image of "a very wounded Christ." It was a picture of Jesus suffering in his passion. She had not seen it before. It struck her to the core. As she gazed upon this image, she had a new insight into what Jesus had undergone when he suffered for us. She says, "I felt how poorly I had thanked him for those wounds; I thought my heart was breaking, and I threw myself before Him while shedding many tears, begging him to give me the grace never to offend him again." This was a profound turning point in her journey, a moment of repentance before the Cross, realizing how much her sins had crucified the Lord, and receiving a new infusion of love for him as our Saviour. The fire of God's love at that moment seared into her soul propelling her forward in her spiritual journey.

Saved by grace

It does not matter whether we are sunken in the mire of sin, or a "card-carrying" follower of Christ, when we come before the Cross of Jesus in the light of God's revelation our hearts can be opened again. We can have new eyes to see the truth of our broken, sinful state; and to humbly acknowledge that our only hope is our Redeemer. John Newton was an 18th century slave-trader. Even though raised as a Christian, he had renounced any need for religion. He crossed the ocean several times as a coarse, cruel captain of a slave ship.

The awful degradation of the slaves in the galley of his ship was no concern to him.

Then, during a terrible storm, which almost wrecked his ship, and killed many of its human cargo, Newton cried out to God for mercy. This was the beginning of his conversion. He later became a minister in the Church of England, and joined William Wilberforce in the fight against slavery. Newton never lost sight of the saving grace which he had received; the grace that turned his life around. In 1779 he wrote the legendary song "Amazing Grace", which rose out of his heart now converted to the Lord. When he wrote "saved a wretch like me", he really meant the words with all his heart. He knew that God had taken him from a bondage more wretched than that of the slaves he had carried on his ship. God in Christ had won him from slavery to freedom, from death to life.

In this book I have sought to sing the same song, but with an altered title, *Amazing Love*. It's a song of gratitude to our Saviour, who has rescued us from sin, and given us new life. It's a song of hope in the victory of Christ who has burst out of the tomb, broken our chains, and set us free. It's a song of joy for our Beloved who has redeemed us by the shedding of his blood and made us his very own. It's a song of praise to God whose amazing love revealed in the crucified and risen Christ is everlasting.

Postscript

THEOLOGY OF REDEMPTION

Ultimately the mystery of Redemption transcends intellectual analysis. We are invited by the Spirit to enter into it by faith. Nevertheless, faith seeks understanding. Theologians have developed various theories to explain what we have experienced in the Redemption, which was won for us by Jesus Christ through his death and resurrection. In the history of redemption theory there have been three major models that have provided us with a way of trying to explaining the mystery. These models offer three perspectives by which we can in some way penetrate the mystery. Preachers of the redemption often favour one of these models over the others, and draw their images from that perspective. Each approach is substantiated by Scripture, and preachers will favour the Scripture texts which fit with their own perspective. However, no one model by itself is sufficient to explain the mystery. Each model is necessary, and they complement one another. The challenge for theologians and preachers is to find an integration of all three approaches.

In his classic work, *Christus Victor*,⁷⁸ Gustaf Aulen teased out these three models of Redemption which have served the Church in articulating the mystery.

a) **Redemption as liberation**

This approach was the favourite of the early Greek Fathers, especially St Irenaeus. It has the strength of uniting the death and resurrection of Jesus in one single movement. The emphasis is on the victory won by Jesus in defeating the powers