

If anyone were to ask you or me to say what is at the centre of Christianity, it's a fair bet that most of us would say 'love' – obviously! And today's second reading, from the First Letter of John, and St John's Gospel which we have just read, would seem to confirm that: "Let us love one another since love comes from God," writes John, and "God is love"; while Jesus in the Gospel tells us, "This is my commandment: love one another, as I have loved you."

It is worth noting, though, that Jesus goes on, "A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends." and "You are my friends, if you do what I command you."

Jesus is speaking, of course, in the context of the last supper. He is about to be arrested, tortured and put to death. As soon as he mentions love, Jesus places it in the context of sacrifice – even to laying down one's life – and of obedience to God's commands.

Of course, Jesus was not the first teacher to point out that true love is sacrificial. Even the pagan poets knew that love was often painful, though they tended to think most often of the pain of rejection or loss. Horace – who is a wonderful poet and who was a very decent man – writes of love:

What miseries await the wretches your splendour unassailed allures!
[*Odes*, 1.5]

while Vergil's famous story of Orpheus and Eurydice tells of a man's inconsolable grief at the loss of his beloved wife-to-be on the morning of their wedding-day:

They say he wept for seven whole months,
beneath an airy cliff, by the waters of desolate Strymon,
and told his tale, in the icy caves, softening the tigers' mood,
and gathering the oak-trees to his song:
as the nightingale grieving in the poplar's shadows
laments the loss of her chicks, that a rough ploughman saw
snatching them, featherless, from the nest:
so she weeps all night, and repeats her sad song perched
among the branches, filling the place around with mournful cries.
[*Georgics*, IV]

Some people have gone so far as to argue that the pain of loss makes it better to avoid love altogether, but even the ancients generally rejected that.

Cicero, for example, in his wonderful book, *On Friendship*, argues,

Should we remove friendship entirely from our lives in order that we might suffer no distress on its account? For when the soul is deprived of emotion, what difference is there — I do not say between man and the beasts of the field, but between man and a stone, or any such thing?
[*De Amicitia*, 48]

So the ancients knew that we needed love, but that love demanded sacrifice and could be painful. What the ancients never contemplated, however, was that God could be caught up in a love affair with humanity that, as St John puts it,

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. [John 3: 16]

Shakespeare puts the pagan attitude well in the words he places on the lips of King Lear, when in despair, Lear says:

As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods: they kill us for their sport.
[King Lear, IV, I, 41]

Indeed, in that beautiful poem about the love of Orpheus and Eurydice, Vergil describes the God of the dead as “*regemque tremendum nesciaque humanis precibus mansuescere corda*. – The terrifying king who knows not how to soften his heart to human entreaty.” What a different God we worship! A God who entered our world to share our human existence, even our suffering and death.

For some Christians, of course, this has meant, and can mean even today, the supreme sacrifice of martyrdom. It is a moving and inspiring thing, as well as a confronting challenge, to read a page of the Martyrology, the Church's list of the martyrs for any given day. But for most Christians it is rather the daily martyrdom of fulfilling their Christian duties that constitutes their particular Cross. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts it this way:

The only perfect sacrifice is the one that Christ offered on the cross as a total offering to the Father's love and for our salvation. By uniting ourselves with his sacrifice we can make our lives a sacrifice to God. [n. 2100]

Of course, parenthood – both as fatherhood and motherhood – gives us an outstanding example of sacrificial love in everyday life. The Bible in several places uses the love of a mother as a metaphor for the love God has for Israel. For example, we read in the prophet Isaiah, “As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.”

Sometimes this love calls for a certain toughness. It is not always easy to restrain, to discipline, to teach a child to overcome selfishness and learn to think of others. The American poet John Greenleaf Whittier puts this aspect of a mother's love well:

A picture memory brings to me;
I look across the years and see
Myself beside my mother's knee.

I feel her gentle hand restrain
My selfish moods, and know again
A child's blind sense of wrong and pain.

But wiser now, a man gray grown,
My childhood's needs are better known.
My mother's chastening love I own.

In passing, on this Mothers' Day we may note that the wisdom of mothers has a special place in scripture, too. For example, Chapter 31 of the Book of Proverbs begins, “The words of Lemuel, king of Massa, which his mother taught him,” and who can forget that Jesus' first miracle was worked at his mother's request, when she told the attendants at Cana, “Do whatever he tells you.”

The only perfect sacrifice is the one that Christ offered on the cross as a total offering to the Father's love and for our salvation. But by uniting ourselves with his sacrifice – which we do whenever we devoutly offer the Holy Eucharist – we can make our lives a sacrifice to God. We can return love in return for his love through the power of his grace and receive the strength to share in his love for humanity by living our lives in love for others.