

OUR GREAT LOVE STORY

Spirituality of the Heart

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SPIRITUALITY OF THE Heart is a spirituality of love—God’s love for us which finds expression and confirmation in our love for self, one another and for all of creation.

The Scriptures—both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament overflow with the revelation of God’s compassionate, faithful love for all of creation. This is evident in the covenants established with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and especially with Moses—‘I will be your God, and you will be my people’ is the constant refrain as these covenants are established, broken (by human kind) and re-established. And it is most evident in the person of Jesus, in his life, death and resurrection. While other less positive themes also emerge there is a consistent story of God’s fidelity even in the face of people’s persistent infidelity.

It seems to me that the particular version of the story we choose to tell about this incredible love affair that God has for all of creation is vital if it is to connect and resonate with people today. Some Christians tell the story as if their’s is the only version, not realising that there are many versions of ‘the story’ even within the Scriptures. Sadly, sometimes the story told is not even ‘good news’ at all. What follows is a spirituality of the heart story which is scripturally based and which is ‘good news’.

Story

It is all about story! Fr Thomas Berry, a Passionist priest who died in recent years, impressed me greatly when he wrote in his book, *Dream of the Earth*, that: ‘it is all a question of story. We are in trouble now because we do not have a good story. We are in between stories. The old story about how the

world came to be and how we fit into it is no longer effective. Yet, we have not learned the new story.’ (123)

Traditionalists can sometimes react negatively to emerging new stories. They can feel the old story they loved is being sentenced to oblivion because it has been judged to be wrong or in error. The emerging new theological story does not make such a judgment. The new story does not judge the traditional story to be wrong; the judgment rather is that it is simply no longer adequate for our times. Just as there was nothing wrong with the horse and buggy, the Remington type-writer or the Gestetner ink copier—they were simply superseded by better technology—so it is with some traditional theological stories.

The traditional stories we told about our origins, about God, human beings, the Church *etc* are no longer adequate because the world has moved on and these stories no longer engage the imaginations of people today. A theology with accompanying spiritual practices and language that assume a three-tiered universe including a flat earth with heaven above and the underworld (hell) below, no longer captures our imaginations today. If indeed the stories we tell are important then a story that includes these elements is inadequate being unable to carry the understanding of the universe we have today.

I find myself in agreement with David Abram’s comments about story: there are good stories and mediocre stories and downright bad stories. How are they to be judged? A story must be judged according to whether it makes sense. To make sense is to enliven the senses. A story that makes sense is one that stirs the senses from their slumber, one that opens the eyes and the ears to their real surroundings,

turning the tongue to the actual tastes in the air and sending chills of recognition along the surface of the skin. To make sense is to release the body from the constraints imposed by outworn ways of speaking, and hence to renew and rejuvenate one's felt awareness of the world. It is to make the senses wake up to where they are. (D Abram, 265).

Good stories also invoke 'dangerous memories'—these are personal or communal memories that have an endless capacity to disturb complacency and birth new life. When we return to these memories they challenge our compromises with what we should not forget, and they inspire recommitment and they revitalize. These are stories that can disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed. (Groom, 360). The Jesus story is a 'dangerous memory' story—it can be a comforting or a disturbing story. When no one is listening and potential hearers of the story remain in their deafness and blindness something is remiss with the way we are telling the story and it is time to re-imagine it.. A spirituality of the heart in my experience is one way of doing this. More of this shortly!

Dualism and Sacramentality

Before exploring heart spirituality explicitly I want to make a few brief comments about dualism and sacramentality—both are relevant for any discussion about spirituality including a spirituality of the heart.

Firstly, dualism: For much of its history Christianity had been plagued by dualistic ways of thinking. Such thinking makes sharp distinctions between apparent opposites rather than seeing differences as complementary and hence parts of a whole. A spirituality that engages people today needs to be holistic rather than dualistic. A dualistic way of thinking is especially harmful if it draws a sharp distinction between spiritual life and secular life. In *Christifideles Laici* (59) Pope John Paul II, quoted the Vatican II Council decree *Gaudium et Spes* (43), when he wrote:



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There cannot be two parallel lives in their existence: on the one hand the so-called 'spiritual life', with its values and demands; and on the other, the so-called 'secular' life, that is, life in a family, at work, in social relationships, in the responsibilities of public life and in culture ... This split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age.

A spirituality of the heart needs to be cognizant of this and to open up pathways to holistic ways of being, to all of creation as an interconnected web and, to humans who belong within this intricate web of connections.

Secondly, sacramentality: in the introduction to his wonderful book, *Begin with the Heart: recovering a sacramental vision*, Daniel O'Leary writes:

We need to set free the Catholic imagination and sacramental vision that has always characterised that tradition. Without catching the vision, the heart does not know where to go; but without the fire of imagination it doesn't want to go anywhere, least of all to church! (13).

Our sacramental imagination tells us that one way of looking at life is to see everything we experience as a symbol behind which lies a greater reality, a reality that cannot be expressed verbally, intellectually or physically, but which is there nonetheless. In this vision all the world is a symbol pointing beyond itself to the uncreated, unseen God. It was this vision that inspired Gerard Manly Hopkins to write: 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God.'

Karl Rahner, the noted Christian theo-

gian, reputedly wrote that ‘the Christian of tomorrow will be a mystic or not a Christian at all.’ And, Daniel O’Leary writes;

We live in a world that is ‘mystically ‘tone-deaf, where all the goods are in the shop window.’ The mystical imagination is not only as real as the scientific imagination; it reveals what science on its own could never tumble to—the many grace-drenched and spirit-laden layers of reality, even inside the law of gravity, that are not always readily available to the senses.’ (21).

Drawing on such luminaries as Rahner, Pope John Paul II, Albert Einstein, George Bernard Shaw, Hans urs von Balthasar, Augustine, Bonhoeffer, Simone Weil and others, O’Leary alerts us to the Catholic insight that grace is integral to nature and that all nature has the capacity to disclose grace and be a vehicle for it. (21). And, ‘with imagination you don’t have to travel far to find God—only notice things. The finite and the infinite live in the same place.’ (23)

The Celts concept of the thin place is a good example of this intimate connection between nature and grace: In every way the visible and the invisible were interwoven, as surely as the air we breathe and the food we eat come together to give life to our bodies. The invisible was separated from our sense perceptions only by the permeable membrane of consciousness. Sometimes that membrane could seem as solid as a brick wall. Sometimes it could seem very thin. Indeed, we speak even today of some places as being ‘thin places’, meaning that the presence of the invisible and the spiritual in those places is almost palpable. (Margaret Silf, *Sacred Spaces: stations on a Celtic Way*)

The foundation stone for re-imagining a new story for our time will be holistic in preference to dualistic and will encompass a world view where God is waiting to be experienced in everyone and in everything. Such a story will be both faithful to the tradition and it will also open our eyes to see that human experience is the threshold to God.

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The Story of the Universe

While being beyond the scope of this paper, some understanding of cosmology is important in moving towards a new story. The cosmology found in our Scriptures and which underpins much Christian theology and spirituality is no longer adequate. The three tiered universe with heaven above, the underworld below and a flat earth surrounded by water is outmoded. In this cosmology God was above and intervened in human history; the earth was at the centre of the universe; and the human being was thought of as a ‘visitor’ on earth, enduring this life as a test before ‘earning’ a place to our true home, heaven.

The commonly accepted version of the story today is that our universe has been expanding and evolving for the past 13.7 billion years and life on planet earth emerged 3.7 billion years ago. The earth is not the centre of the universe; it is positioned on the other edge of one of the spiral arms of the Milky Way galaxy and there are millions of other galaxies; and, the earth is but one of countless billions of stars. God is not above or totally outside the process of ‘Cosmogenesis’ but is intimately part of it, not only creating and sustaining but also bringing all things to their fulfillment.

In this new story a God who intervenes (occasionally) in history disrupting life and nature becomes problematic as does an anthropology that sees the human being as separate from the rest of creation. We are learning to recognize the unity of the whole process and of the unbreakable bond of relatedness that allows us to speak of a ‘universe’.

In virtue of this relatedness, everything is intimately present to everything else in the universe. Nothing is completely itself without everything else.... The universe is a communion and a community. We are that communion become conscious of itself. (Berry, 91)

The Jesus Story

For several hundred years the Western Christian story has not concerned itself with cos-

mology. There are several reasons for this which are not my concern here. We can identify a shift from a ‘creation mystique’ to a ‘redemption mystique.’ (Berry, 129). The redemption mystique has narrowly focused on ‘the Savior, the human person, the believing church, and a postearthly paradisaal beatitude.’ (Berry, 128). Further, within this redemption mystique the focus has been even more narrowly conceived, with a theory of the Christ-event built around sacrifice, satisfaction and substitutionary atonement.

This story draws on just one of ten different images that Paul uses as he grapples with the interpretation and meaning of the paschal mystery. In our age, Denis Edwards writes, we are in need of a viable alternative. (Edwards, 108). In proposing the need for a new theory (story) Edwards outlines some critical tests: it must be faithful to the God proclaimed in Jesus’ words and deeds, the God of boundless compassion and self-giving love. It will refuse to locate violence in God suggesting that God required Jesus’ death to appease God’s anger. Another critical test outlined by Edwards for any new theory is that it must be large enough to embrace all of creation and not just the human species. (Edwards, 108 -109). I will return to the story we tell about Jesus that is consistent with a spirituality of the heart at the end of this paper.

Bible Stories

Just as there are a variety of stories (theories) that open different windows onto the meaning of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection so too there are many different images of God presented in the Scriptures. Such variety is necessary because no one image (or all the images taken as a whole) can possibly reveal God. The story the Scriptures tell is an incredible love story; the God we encounter in Scripture is an ardently compassionate lover who despite being ignored, rejected, and spurned continues to love because God cannot do otherwise. Despite flirting here and there with other images of God (for example, God the judge who demands punishment

as the price for justice) the human authors of the Scriptures eventually affirm that ‘God is love’ and ‘to love is to be in God.’ Love is the only pathway to the heart of God.

I am attracted by Moses’ experience on Mount Horeb; the well-known encounter with God in the burning bush (*Exodus* 3.1-6). God is revealed to Moses in a bush that is on fire but is not consumed. We are familiar with the phrase ‘hearts on fire’. A bush on fire but not consumed is a metaphor for a heart on fire. Of the six hundred and thirty seven times ‘fire’ occurs in the bible most refer to God’s consuming fire so, the fire that does not consume encountered by Moses is a powerful symbol. The task that lay ahead of Moses was enormous—a bush that was not consumed, a love that endures, was the kind of support and assurance he needed. And, once on the journey one of the symbols of God’s faithful, guiding presence is the ‘pillar of fire’ (*Ex* 13.21, 22, 14.24).

We are very familiar with fire or flame as a symbol for ardent passion – the sacred heart symbol has a crest of flame. And Deuteronomy reminds us that God is a jealous God, a consuming fire (*Deut* 4. 24); Luke presents us with a similar image of Jesus as he anxiously approaches his final days:

‘I came to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled.’ (12.49).

And then, at the end of his Gospel, in the well-known Emmaus story, Luke has the two disciples recall a different fire as they reflect on their experience of the Risen Christ on the road: ‘were not our hearts burning within us’. (*Luke* 24.31). A spirituality of the heart evokes an ardent, passionate fire that is creative and cleansing and is not ultimately destructive.

God’s judgement delivered as consuming fire is a very familiar image of God. Hence the fire of Moses that does not consume is an astounding image. And, even though God as judge has been a favourite of preachers and evangelists there are many softer images which better accord with a spirituality of the heart. Such images include: father, mother, lover, shepherd, eagle and potter.

Heart in Scripture

There are over one thousand references to the word ‘heart’ in the Bible and only a rare few intend the heart as a physical organ. For the most part ‘heart’ is used in a symbolic, metaphorical way. In most of these references heart carries the sense of the whole person, the very essence, the real or true self, the person in their innermost depths.

Hebrew Scriptures

I begin this exploration of the heart in Scripture with reference to some soulful passages from the Hebrew Scriptures: the author of the *Song of Solomon* puts these words in God’s mouth:

You have ravished my heart, my sister, my bride,
you have ravished my heart with a glance of
your eyes, with one jewel of your necklace.
(*Song of Solomon* 4.9)

How beautiful—God says: I am in pain because I am ever faithful, ever loving, always looking out for you and you are unfaithful, you ignore me, you turn your face away and, you *ravish* my heart! That is not a distant, judgmental God. We find this intimate, passionate love of God present in many other places—my favourite is Jeremiah’s complaint:

O Lord, you have seduced me, and I was seduced; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed ... O Lord of hosts, you test the righteous, you see the heart and the mind ... (*Jeremiah* 20.7, 12).

God the seductive one, the one who draws close and overpowers me (with love).

And again in the Prophet Hosea:

How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? ... My heart recoils within me: my compassion grows warm and tender. (*Hosea* 9.8)

This is the great theme of the journey of faith of the Hebrew people, of the followers of Jesus and of all people of faith: God’s constant, persistent outreach to us, urgent at times, constantly frustrated, but passionate and unfailingly faithful. It is a great love affair. Ours is a personal God calling us into relationship.

The God who calls us into relationship is clearly evident in the giving of the law to Moses—Christians tend to forget the opening verse to the Ten Commandments: ‘I am the Lord Your God’ ... the version I learnt went straight to, ‘Thou shalt not ...’, whereas the text actually says, ‘who bought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery’ (*Exodus* 20.2). That is, I love you, I am on your side. The commandments that follow are not a test, but are given for a people who already know that they are loved, cared for and protected. We don’t keep the commandments to earn this love, care and protection—it is already given. The commandments are the sign posts for living as a loving and caring people; as a people of heart, as heart people! We have been very good at turning love into law—a spirituality of heart counsels resistance to this tendency.

As this great love story unfolds we are very familiar with what happens: despite God’s fidelity people have not reciprocated this love. This persistent infidelity is dealt with by all the prophets—Jeremiah expresses it with these words: ‘this people has a stubborn and rebellious heart.’ (*Jer* 5.23). Besides rebellious hearts we also find reference to ‘hearts of stone’ and ‘hearts turned away.’

The Psalms which are a source of many of the references to the ‘heart’ speak beautifully of what is required of us. Psalm 51, which a number of writers consider one of the most important prayers for a spirituality of the heart, is perhaps the best example. This psalm acknowledges the initiative for love flows always from God’s steadfast love and abundant mercy; it acknowledges our inadequacies in responding with steadfast love; and then, names what God desires: ‘You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.’ (We could sit for days with those words alone!). And then, ‘Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.’ (*Ps* 51.10). And finally,

O Lord, open my lips and my mouth will declare your praise. For you have no delight in sacrifice; If I were to give you a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice accept-

able to God is a broken and contrite heart. (*Ps* 51.15-17)

Psalm 51, then, gives us such evocative phrases as: secret heart; clean heart; broken and contrite heart.

This Psalm invites us to reflect on the movement from external observance to purity of heart; from the observances of laws and codes, rituals and various mandated acts, to nurturing an open, honest and loving heart. What is needed is not only external observance of the Law; that is not enough; a conversion of the heart, a new heart such that we live authentically from our deepest, inner most self so that who we are on the inside is who are in our day to day living. Such honesty is too much for us and yet we know that God sees and loves us in our inner self.

These sentiments find expression in the prophets. There are many passages that could be used as examples. Let Jeremiah and Ezekiel speak for them all:

This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write in on their hearts, and I will be their God and they shall be my people. (*Jer* 31.33).

And Ezekiel,

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.

And then, *Deuteronomy* gives us the most beautiful, graphic summary of this new heart:

Surely this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it. Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross to the other side for us so that we may hear it and observe it.' No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.' (*Dt* 30.11-14)

Christian Scriptures

In the Christian Scriptures Jesus is pre-

sented as a man of heart and, as his life and ministry unfold, he is presented as compassion personified. God is love and Jesus is love incarnate; his life exemplifies what it is to be on earth the heart of God. John concludes the prologue to his gospel with these words: 'No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son who is close to the Father's heart who has made him known.' Jesus is close to the Father's heart; and then, in what I think among the most profound words in all of Scripture John writes:

As you Father are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one. I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and loved them as you loved me... Father, the world does not know you, but I know you and these know that you have sent me. I have made your name known to them and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them. (*Jn* 17.21-23, 26).

We are learning in our day the incredible intricacy of the whole of the universe; we are learning now in our time about the intimate interconnectedness of everything—I am in you and you are in me! If the ultimate goal of love is union, this is perfect union; and, we are perfectly united, we are one. We forget that and hence we live as if it's not true—that's sin! We need to be reminded so that we remember and so return to our source.

One of the classic texts of Jesus' life giving love for us comes from John's Gospel: 'one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear and at once blood and water came out.' (*Jn* 19.34) The blood and water flowing from the side of Jesus (his life source) has come to symbolise Jesus, in an ultimate sense, giving his whole self to us, that is, opening the riches of his heart for us. The wounded side gives us open access to his heart as it were. When we gaze on the one whom they have pierced we see not just Jesus in the last moments of his life; we see rather his whole life, we recall how he poured himself out,

compassionately reaching out to everyone, especially those most in need of his embrace.

There are countless passages from the Gospels where Jesus is described as being deeply moved by people whom he met. Some examples:

When he saw the widow he was moved with compassion for her (*Lk* 7.13)

A Samaritan traveller was moved with compassion when he saw him. (*Lk* 10.33)

Jesus, moved with compassion for the leper said .. (*Mk* 1.41)

Jesus saw a large crowd and was moved with compassion for them .. (*Mk* 6.34)

Jesus said: ‘I am moved with compassion for all these people ... (*Mk* 8.2)

Jesus was moved with compassion (for the two blind men) and he touched their eyes (*Mt* 20.34)

The heart of Jesus is a love-filled heart capable of being deeply moved by the plight of those with whom he lived. The early followers of Jesus recognised that, as they were drawn into relationship with him, they were also being challenged to love as Jesus loved.

And so, as we turn to our own response it is John who gives us the classic text for a spirituality of the heart:

‘In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us ...’. (*1Jn* 4.10)

The initiative is God’s; our response is to love—John’s constant refrain is:

Beloved, love one another because love is from God and, if we love one another God lives in us and love is perfected in us. (*1Jn* 4.12).

The Good News is: ‘God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.’ (*Rm*5.5). We are invited to believe that God’s love is freely given, we don’t earn it—God loves us while we were still sinners Paul tells us in *Romans* (*Rm*5.8). It is God who let the light shine out of darkness, ‘who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.’ (*2Cor* 4.6) God looks on us with love; our response is simply to return the gaze, to be in love too.

And so, in numerous examples, we hear that it is God who opens our hearts to listen to the word of God (e.g. *Acts* 16.14). Mary is presented as an example for us to follow: ‘she treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.’ (*Lk* 2.19). And Paul, recalling the words of *Deuteronomy* we noted earlier, ‘The word is near to you, on your lips and in your heart’ tells us we need to ‘believe with the heart’ (*Rm* 10.10). The most stunning text about opening our heart for the indwelling of the Christ’s love is this:

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (*Ephesians* 3.14-19)

Christ lives in our heart through faith.

The Christ of love we encounter in our own hearts also calls us to reach out in love to one another and for all of creation. Christian life is relational—it is all about relationships—just as God loves us, so must we love one another. We are encouraged to have the same mind as Christ (*Phil* 2.5). Jesus’ life was devoted to proclaiming and ushering in the Kingdom of God—God’s dream for all of creation.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me

to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives

and recovery of sight to the blind,

to let the oppressed go free,

to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.

(*Luke* 4.18-19)

And, in the *Book of Revelation* we are given a vision of a new heaven and a new earth:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away,

and the sea was no more... 'See, I am making all things new.' ...I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. (*Revelation* 21.1-4, 5b, 6b-7)

In Christ there is a new creation. And, the commandment to love will be the sign post for how those in the new creation will live. In this new creation Paul presents us with an idyllic picture of what life in community will be like:

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (*Colossians* 3. 12-17)

The commandment to love is the summary of the great summary of what is required of a disciple of Jesus. It seems that at the time of Jesus there was considerable debate about which of the two commandments was the greatest:

Deuteronomy 6.4-5: Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

Or,

Leviticus 19.18 says: You shall love your neighbour as yourself.

All four Gospels have a version of Jesus speaking about the commandment to love. And, some Scripture scholars believe there is a development in understanding of this commandment from the earliest Christian traditions to those found in the latter text, the First Letter of John.

Matthew's Gospel, even though it is not the first Gospel written, seems to have the earliest tradition of the great commandment:

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' He said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.' (*Mt* 23.34-40)

In the Gospel of Mark we read:

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, 'Which commandment is the first of all?' Jesus answered, 'The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these.' Then the scribe said to him, 'You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength', and 'to love one's neighbour as oneself',—this is much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices.' When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.' After that no one dared to ask him any question. (*Mark* 12.28-34)

(Luke is similar to Mark, except Luke has a lawyer ask the question)

The Scribe earns very high praise from Jesus. 'You are not far from the Kingdom of God', coming as it does from Jesus, is the highest possible commendation. What the scribe sees, and helps Jesus to see, is that these two commandments are in fact one, just two sides of the same coin. The Scribe blends the two commandments together without any hierarchy so that, rather two commandments with one being first and the other second, there is

just one. To love God and to love neighbour are not two separate commandments as if one could obey one and not the other; they are inseparably one. And, it is the Johannine tradition that spells this out unambiguously.

In John's Gospel we read:

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.' (*John* 13.34-35)

And, the final word, the most fully developed understanding of this, is found in John's first letter:

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love . . . Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. (1 *John* 4.7 -21)

When the disciples, Peter, James and John came down from the mountain of Transfiguration they saw only Jesus. When you and I look at one another what do we see? Well, you will see just me and I will see just you! A reflection on the Spirituality of the Heart invites us to see into the heart of each other and recognise in one another the indwelling presence of God; it invites us to look into the heart of all of reality and each and every element, and to see and embrace there the heart of God.

I return then to the story we tell about Jesus.

The Jesus Story

The story we tell about Jesus needs to be consistent with this rich scriptural tradition of love. It is a profoundly relational story. The God Jesus reveals is a God who is both personal and transcendent, a God of love, a God who is

against all dehumanisation or disfigurement of God's creatures, a God who is sympathetic to human suffering. Jesus' life death and resurrection reveals, symbolises and exemplifies that God's loving presence has always been present in creation. (R. Haight, 360) And, as he experienced his oneness with God, he learnt that unconditional, self-expansive love was the only way to experience the reign of God.

In Jesus, the self-diffusive creating presence of God is given a human face and God is now present in a visible, audible and concrete way. This is what is truly unique about Christianity. For Judaism and Islam, though Moses and Muhammad are receivers of revelation, God is not revealed in them as persons, but in the words of the *Torah* and *Qur'an*. And for Buddhism, the Buddha as person is not the revelation; rather, the Buddha's teachings disclose the path to enlightenment and compassion. Christianity finds the primary revelation of God in a person. So John can write, the Word became flesh and lived among us. Jesus is what can be seen of God embodied in human life. Jesus in his very person (in his heart) shows us the heart of God. (M. Borg, 81). Jesus does not simply utter words about God; he himself is the uttered word. He is, in his humanity, the message he brings.

And, what is true for Jesus is also true for all humanity. 'A new consciousness has unfolded the world. The human is now the home of the divine.' (O'Leary, 82). God's presence is accessible everywhere in everyone's everyday experience—freely accessible, freely available. No intermediaries are needed. There is no place, no anywhere, that is not infused with God's presence.

What Jesus did was to reveal the holiness of every aspect of each of our lives. 'He ended the dualism that saw grace as a kind of divine icing on a human cake. He revealed that creation and humanity are graced from the very beginning.' (O'Leary, 82). In Jesus' life, death and resurrection the mysterious love and meaning that is hidden in the heart of each person and in all of creation is broken open.

The Christian response is not simply to follow Jesus' example; nor is it to discern the values by which he lived and to live by the same code of conduct. In his first encyclical Pope Benedict XVI reminded us that:

Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and, a decisive direction. (*Deus Caritas Est*, 1)

Christian life is first and foremost relational, it begins with a movement (a conversion) in one's own heart and it responds with a compassionate embrace of all of creation, the meeting place of the Holy One in our midst.

In his book, *Walking the Way Of Jesus: an essay in Christian Spirituality*, Eugene Cuskelly MSC writes that the story we tell about Jesus needs to be like the one seamless garment, it needs to be consistent with the central core of our faith. (17) And, what makes us Christians is that we 'have learned to believe in the love that God has for us.' (1Jn 4.16) The story we tell about Jesus, the explanation of his suffering and death, how he 'saves us' needs to be consistent with an all-embracing, compassionate God. Explanations that focus narrowly on Jesus' suffering and tortuous death as being required by God for salvation are not consistent with a loving God.

In his most recent book (*How God Acts*) Denis Edwards addresses this issue:

Twenty first century Christians are in need of a theory of redemption that can offer a viable alternative to traditional theories such as those that have been built around sacrifice, satisfaction, and substitutionary atonement. (108)

He informs us that Paul uses ten different images drawn from biblical tradition and that this variety is necessary because no one image or concept is sufficient to express the overwhelming action of God in Jesus. Roger Haight also addresses the issue of the pluralism of Christologies and soteriologies found in the New Testament, noting that they really are different and that a different story about how Jesus saves emerges in each of them. (Haight 152 f)

In arriving at an acceptable theory for to-

day Edwards outlines some critical tests:

A theory will need to be 'faithful to the God proclaimed in Jesus' words and deeds, the God of boundless compassion and self-giving love.' And, 'it will need to be large enough to embrace all of creation.' Further, 'it will refuse to locate violence in God but will reveal redemption as the act of the God proclaimed in the words and deeds of Jesus.' (108)

A God of love finds nothing pleasing or good in 'the tragic affair of Jesus' painful journey to execution' (Haight, 345) God did not send Jesus to die a cruel and excruciatingly painful death. That Jesus died this way was not a requirement from God. A lecturer I heard recently said, to wish anybody to suffer in that way is 'a mortal sin'. It is Jesus' whole life, including him remaining loving even to death that reveals how we are to live in a loving way. Jesus lived his life committed to the end. It is not the death of Jesus in itself that is pleasing to God. God cannot be construed as being pleased with death. Rather, resurrection, life and salvation correlate with the positive, loyal dedication of Jesus' freedom to God's cause to the end. (Haight, 159) The Good News is not that Jesus died an excruciatingly tortuous death but, that God raised him up, that out of death came life.

Old metaphors like Jesus paying the ransom for sin; saving us by the blood of the cross and this being the price he had to pay for our redemption are inconsistent with a God of love, a God who is infinitely loving and compassionate. We pass from sin to life by believing in God's love for us and for all people and for the world that God made—and then letting that love rule our lives. The sin that separates us from God is the failure to believe in the wonderful, transforming love of God.

Christian salvation is relational; it is the experience of encountering God in Jesus Christ. 'Christian salvation is no more and no less than the meeting with God in Jesus the Christ.' (Haight 333) Jesus' contemporaries, not God, demanded his death on the cross. The God we meet in Jesus is all-embracing, com-

passionate love. Jesus remains faithful to expressing this love even through his suffering and death. 'It is not suffering in itself that is salvific, but Jesus' commitment, obedience and fidelity through it.' (Haight 341) Jesus then enables us to believe in God's love for us and as such he makes God present in a saving way. And, he not only revealed this to us but he showed us how to live a loving life, he is 'an exemplar of what it means to be human.' (Haight 361).

Jesus shows us perfectly what it is to be on earth the heart of God. Of all the statements from Christian commentators, preachers and theologians, about why he came, the purpose of his life, the one that most closely relates to heart spirituality is: he shared our humanity so that humans would know their divinity—the divine one became human so that human ones become divine! And so we are called to be one heart and mind with Jesus—to be the radically free, compassionate, all inclusive lover that he was. In the sure and certain knowledge that we are loved unconditionally fear of failure is overcome. As we gaze on the One whom they have pierced we learn it is our vulnerability that opens us to both recognise our need to love and to receive it. 'There is crack in everything, that's how the light gets in.' (Leonard Cohen)

Paul's description of love (1 *Corinthians* 13) is one of the best descriptions of the God of love revealed in Jesus and of how we are to

live with one another as a people loved by God.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

A spirituality of the heart is all about love; the love God has for us present since the beginning of creation but made known in the Scriptures and brought to full realisation in Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus not only makes known God's all-embracing compassionate love, he is also the perfect example of what it is to be a loving human being. Following the example of Jesus we enter our own heart and discover there God's love; and, confident and deeply immersed in God's love for us we are invited to go out and be on earth the heart of God.

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