

Getting to Know our Faith and our Church

One person asked: *“What, if anything distinguishes Christian love from other forms of love? There are obviously different forms of love. The Beatles sang about it; we talk of mother love; romantic love; there is sacrificial love, ‘No man hath greater love ...’. In the Bible Love and Charity seem to be interchangeable ‘... but the greatest of these is love/charity’.”*

For all the richness and power of the English language, and I make no claim of particular eloquence myself, there are areas in which our language feels limited. One of those is the range of vocabulary relating to ‘love’.

If we look at words for colours we find that there are ranges of words for similar colours: purple (derived from Latin and Greek), mauve (derived from French), magenta, fuschia and also in common usage violet and indigo, for example. The writer C S Lewis explored the variety of meanings of the word ‘love’ in his book ‘The Four Loves’ published in 1960 which drew together a series of radio talks he had given in 1958. In this he focussed on four distinctive words in Greek that are all commonly translated into English as ‘love’: storgē, Greek: στοργή – fond familiarity; philía, Greek: φιλία – strong friendship; erōs, Greek: ἔρωσ – being ‘in love’; and agápē, Greek: ἀγάπη – unconditional love, which C S Lewis highlighted as having a character of divine love.

Alongside these we should note the English word ‘charity’, most commonly in contemporary use denoting a formal institution as in a registered charity rather than former use as the virtue of charity in terms of personal demeanour and behaviour. ‘Charity’ has its roots in the Latin word caritas. This was but one of several words that they had relating to ‘love’ such as amore, dilectio, ardor, and affectus: Words from which we derive amorous, delight, ardour and affection.

The well known passage in 1 Corinthians 13 uses the Greek word agape, usually translated as ‘love’ but in the Authorized Version (King James Bible) the word ‘charity’ is used. Interestingly French translations have similarly moved from the use of ‘charité’ to that of ‘amour’.

Rather than use so many different words for shades of meaning the English language has evolved to use adjectives, such as ‘motherly’, ‘romantic’, ‘sacrificial’ to qualify the noun ‘love’ and similar adverbs to qualify the verb. So when we use ‘Christian’ as such an adjective what might we mean?

My understanding is that many other such adjectives are used to distinguish the character of love involved replicating the broader vocabulary of the Latin and Greek languages. However, when the word ‘Christian’ is used I understand something different.

To explain, consider the variety of vegetables and fruits that are available for consumption – a variety as diverse as all the forms of love encompassed in the words noted above: yams, spinach, beans, carrots and many, many, more. Often we have little idea of where and how they have been grown: from growbags to greenhouses, in open fields or modern hydroponics, there are many methods and many places from which or fruit and vegetables may have come.

For me, the use of the adjective ‘Christian’ when referring to ‘love’ relates not to the type of love (storge, philia, eros, agape, etc) but to where the love is coming from – the Christian life, faith, commitment, hope in which the love is offered. Any of the types of love can be ‘Christian’, and the recipient of an act of love may recognise the type of love but be unable to distinguish the motivation or origin of that love as ‘Christian’: For in many contexts the act of loving would be outwardly no different if it came from a Muslim, a Hindu, Buddhist, Humanist or other faith or non-faith perspective.