

**How much love?**

*Genesis 12:1-4a; John 3:1-17*

Elizabeth Barrat Browning – no relation – wrote:

*How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.  
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height  
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight  
For the ends of being and ideal grace.  
I love thee to the level of every day's  
Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.  
I love thee freely, as men strive for right.  
I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.  
I love thee with the passion put to use  
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.  
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose  
With my lost saints. I love thee with the breath,  
Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose,  
I shall but love thee better after death.*

How much do you love? Who do you love? What do you love? Benjamin Franklin wrote: “If you would be loved, love and be lovable.” Do you love? Are you lovable? It’s just under a month since Valentine’s Day when the world, or some of it at least, sent cards and flowers and chocolates, but for those of us who received none, again, we know that love is, thankfully, far more than cards and flowers and chocolates!

Love for the people of faith is about the encounter, we have with God and with the people around us. In our anxious, slightly hysterical world at the moment, where nervousness about touch has become very real, how do we experience and share love? What does it mean to be loved? How do we form those connections which will not only sustain but transform our lives with trust and blessing and love?

Trust and blessing and love are core Christian values. We read about it in the Abram story where the patriarch of Jewish, Christian and Muslim faith, trusting in the call of God, leaves what is familiar and safe to venture out into the world do things with God and for God and because of God. The city of Haran from which Abram is called means, ‘highway’ or ‘crossroads’. God’s call

to Abram at this crossroads and Abram's faithful response is the starting point of Israel's history. In Abram's trusting, loving decision, Judaism, Christianity and Islam have their roots. Love is only enabled by trust. When you have come to love, have you also come to trust? What can love be if there is no trust? And the opposite is also true: if there is no trust there can be no love.

What we see in the story of Abram, and the story of Nicodemus in John's gospel, is the embracing of the new. Here are people who are called to seek, or are seeking already, and in their searching for meaning in life, purpose in life, a way ahead in life, encounter God in different ways; and encounter the love of God. Stepping out into an unknown, not knowing all the answers before they stepped out, Abram and Nicodemus encounter the love of God. They find, as they continue that journey of life, how much the God of love loves them.

The Dutch Catholic theologian and priest, Henri Nouwen wrote:

*"The question is not, "How am I to find God?" but, "How am I to let myself be found by Him?"... The question is not, "How am I to love God?" but, "How am I to let myself be loved by God?" God is looking into the distance for me, trying to find me, and longing to bring me home."*

Could it be said that from wherever they came from, whatever they were looking for, God met Abram, and Nicodemus, and as they searched, found them; as they sought to follow and love God, found that God was already following and loving them?

Our faith is a following and finding faith. The Lord of faith, Who we meet in Jesus, more often than not is on the move, rather than static. And in His movement, He is motivated by love for us. So that we can be at home with Him.

In any time of trouble, any time of crisis, any time of fear, any time of anxiety, this is a tremendous thing to know and believe about God. As we seek, lose, seek again, fail to find, seek yet again this God of ours, God is already on the look-out for us. That is how much God loves us. Not because we deserve it, not because we have earned it, but because we need it and, in those dark times, or challenging times, it helps.

Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews, comes to Jesus in the night, in the darkness, fearful, but searching for a word from God, and is found by it. The already searching God, in Jesus, give an answer to the searching man. God so loves the world, God so loves you. How much? This much – enough to wait for you, answer you, listen to you, reach out to you, include you, welcome you, bless you.

In this time when many people are anxious about the spread of a 'flu virus, not simply because of the illness it might bring, but because of the isolation it may also cause, the belief that our searching, waiting, answering, listening, reaching out, including, welcoming, blessing God is already out there, that is something. Out there with the medical professionals who will bring help if needed. Out there with the people in our communities who will keep things ticking over, stocking shelves, sharing food, phoning up to check we're all right, taking sensible and sensitive decisions about what to open, what to close, what to open again. This is how much God loves us, and not just in the time of this crisis, but in every crisis. Living with us, alive with us.

Recently I was with someone who was seeking faith. A commitment to the Church and membership might, or might not come, but the interest is there. As we talked, the person was surprised by how much about faith they already knew, and particular about Jesus. I could see the connections being made as they wondered, and thought, and questioned, and pondered. The person said, "I am surprised at how welcoming God is, even to someone like me." That word, 'even'. How many of us betray a level of low self-esteem by using it. "I'm not that important. I don't really matter. I'm just a small cog in the wheel." But 'even' for people like us, God says, "I love you."

God has decided to love the whole world. God does not love only those who gather on Sunday, not just the religiously inclined, not just those who have heard the name of Jesus, but the whole world. This is the good news. This is what we share, that even for people like us, God shows nothing but acceptance, and love.

God's love does not coerce us into relationship, but does require us to choose if we will love God in return. A stepping stone can also be a stumbling block. A healing presence can be a disturbing

presence. Every light casts a shadow. God comes into our little lives, where maybe we don't expect very much of ourselves, but where we have to decide how we will respond to God's love.<sup>i</sup> Because God loves calls us onward to be something, and do something, with the gift of life that we have been given.

I don't suppose anyone expected very much from Abram. Poor old soul, nearly ninety, hearing voices, leaving his home to find a promised land and start a new nation. *Of course that's right, Abram*, the concerned and the cynical might have said. But such was God's love for Abram, and Abram's for God, that this story of a tired old man making a decision and a crossroads and journeying onward, led to nations being born, and billions coming to relationship with God. Or Nicodemus, *I'll just step out for a breath of fresh night air*, and encountering Jesus, and asking, and wondering, and keeping on wondering, until years later, it was Nicodemus, the Pharisee, the Jewish leader, who went with Joseph of Arimathea and asked Pilate for Jesus' broken dead body, and cared for it and buried it in a tomb, when all Jesus' real friends and followers had melted into the night. Such was God's love for Nicodemus, and Nicodemus' love for God, that he played that small part of putting Jesus' body into the tomb, from which Jesus emerged three days later at Easter, alive.

How much love? How much love does God have for the world? Enough to walk with the old folk into a teeming future of possibility; enough to be in the night with the doubting folk in order that they might be part of the Good Friday and Easter process of Jesus dying and rising.

And enough for you, and for me, with our questions and our possibilities, our certainties and our doubts, our repressed frustration and our expressed generosity, our half-formed dreams and our fully formed plans, enough love from God, for us, to be something extraordinary, and unique, and special, and breath-taking, and wondrous in a world too often shrouded in darkness and anxiety and fear and death.

How much love? A cross full of love; an empty tomb full of love; an eternity full of love.

The American writer Truman Capote once wrote, "Love, having no geography, knows no boundaries." On you, within you, today, God's love is at work. How will you put that love into

action, give that love hands and feet and heart and voice, in this coming week? God knows, the world needs it. For God so loved the world; for God so loved you, that He gave his only Son, that you might have life. Love it. Live it.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> Brett Younger, Feasting on the Gospels, John, vol 1 p71