

Just Love

**Personal and social
transformation in Christ**

**Angus Ritchie and Paul
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instant
apostle

Introduction

This book is about *love*. No other word creates so many opportunities for confusion and misunderstanding. We say that we love our spouse, our house, our best friend, our favourite meal... or our local football team. It is hard to think of another word that has such a variety of meanings!

Even when we know the context, the word can generate false expectations and lead to pain and disappointment. As we grow up, we learn to our cost that 'I love you' means very different things to different people.

Take a look at this week's Top 40, or at the films that your local cinema is screening. It's a fair bet that many of them will have 'love' in the title. On the surface, the dominant culture and the Christian faith speak with a single voice. They agree that love is a treasure beyond price; that it is the one thing for which we would – and should – give up everything else:

Love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If one offered for love all the wealth of one's house, it would be utterly scorned.

Song of Solomon 8:6-7 (New Revised Standard Version)

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears ... And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

1 Corinthians 13:8-10,13

Who could disagree with that?

Love and the cross

But what do these words actually mean? What kind of love does the Bible have in mind?

In Christianity, the central image of love is not a romantic embrace, or the bonds of marriage, family or friendship. It is something altogether more disturbing: a man executed upon a cross by an occupying regime. As Jesus tells his disciples:

If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters – yes, even their own life – such a person cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

Luke 14:26-27

These are difficult words. They go to the heart of His mission and His message. They are meant to disturb and provoke us, to shake us out of the complacent assumption that we know what it is to love.

One of the ways our culture seeks to domesticate Jesus is to say He is simply ‘a good man who taught us the importance of love and compassion’. To say that is to tame Him, to make *Him* conform to *our* ethical consensus. His sayings are designed to shock and to disturb. His central invitation is to ‘follow me’ – for it is only by walking the way of the cross that we find out what ‘love’ and ‘compassion’ really mean.

Structure of this book

Each chapter of this book considers a different aspect of love. Christlike love is in some ways tremendously simple, and yet it involves holding a number of surprising things together: it is both merciful *and* just; it is universal *and* yet deeply personal; it involves vulnerability *and* yet it is the most powerful force in the universe. In every chapter, one of these paradoxes will be explored. The chapters each fall into four sections:

Introduction: an initial discussion of one aspect of love.

Gospel: reflection on a passage which speaks about that same theme.

Stories: one or two stories of modern discipleship which cast light on this aspect of love and how we might embody it today.

Action: a final drawing together of the discussion, moving on to a small, practical suggestion for action in the week ahead.

Lent: walking the way of love

From the earliest days of the faith, Lent has been a season when Christians seek to renew their walk in the way of the cross.

The Gospel passages used in *Just Love* are the ones that are read in many churches on the Sundays of Lent. But the book can be used at any time – whether or not you go to church, and whether or not your local church keeps the different seasons of the Christian year – for these Gospel readings, and the questions they raise, are of value in every situation and season. They help us to understand the meaning of the cross and, in doing so, they help us to understand what it *really* means to love.

And in the end – as the Bible and our culture agree – that is the one thing that really matters.

Chapter 1

Spiritual *and* Embodied

Introduction

Love is the most spiritual of experiences, but it cannot be separated from its physical expression. If a couple were to say that their love for one another had become so 'spiritual' that they never even touched each other, we would know that something was seriously wrong. The love we have for our friends – our mutual concern and affection – is revealed in gestures as well as words. But there is more to both kinds of love than these gestures. For our affection to count as genuine love, it needs to be shown in our ongoing care for one another – in ways that have a real and lasting cost. When I say, 'I love you,' what makes it true (or false) is not just my feelings at that moment, but also my behaviour in the months and years ahead.

The Bible describes love with great beauty and intensity, most notably in the Song of Solomon. This is not a book that spares its readers' blushes! There is usually embarrassment in church when its vivid descriptions of romantic desire and love are read at Sunday services. Nonetheless, we *do* read it in church because it is part of Holy Scripture, part of God's self-revelation. Because such a love poem has been placed in the Bible, we learn that our physical desires and loves are deeply spiritual matters. According to the Song of Solomon, they offer us an image of the love God has for us. For Christianity, as for Judaism, 'spirituality' is not about running away from our bodies and our desires. It is about learning to embody God's love ever more faithfully.

The Bible takes our material nature seriously. In its teaching on both personal and economic relationships, the central

question is how our physical interactions are going to embody faithfulness, generosity and love. We can exploit one another's bodies – viewing other people simply as instruments of our own pleasure and power – or our physical interactions can help us grow into the image of God. It is through the practical love we show to our fellow human beings that we grow beyond ourselves. Love of God and love of neighbour are absolutely inseparable – and love of neighbour has a material, as well as a spiritual, dimension.

As Archbishop Justin Welby explains:

When Christians speak in public about community flourishing or about justice, there's always someone who will pop up and ask why we're sticking our noses in, as if these things were miles away from the proper concerns of Christianity.

Recently there have been the issues of money and credit unions and power costs of which the church has spoken. Stick to God, we are told. So we do, and we find ... Jesus saying: Love God, love neighbour.

The common good of the community and justice are absolutely central to what it means to be a Christian. They flow from the love of Jesus on the Cross, offering salvation, enabling justice and human freedom.¹

This combination of the physical and the spiritual runs through the teachings of the Law and the Prophets, but Christians believe it reaches its completion in Jesus. In the incarnation, God's Word of love becomes flesh. In Christ, God does not give us a set of commands or ideals, but becomes a human person, offering us a wholly different level of

¹ Address to the Church Urban Fund *Tackling Poverty Together* conference, 13 November 2013.

relationship. Shane Claiborne – a leading figure in the ‘New Monasticism’ movement – writes that:

Jesus shows us what God is like with skin on – in a way we can touch, feel and follow. My Latino friends have taught me the word *incarnation* shares the same root as *en carne* or *con carne*, which means ‘with meat’. We can see God in other places and at work throughout history, but the climax of all history is Jesus.²

In Christ we see not only that God *loves*, but that God *is love* – for He reveals to us that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As the priest and community theologian Kenneth Leech puts it, ‘in God there is social life, community, sharing. To share in God is to share in that life.’³ So when we love, we do not simply *imitate* God. We participate in His very life. This is what the First Letter of Peter means by calling us ‘partakers of the divine nature.’

Union with God sounds a very spiritual thing. But the Bible tells us that this *spiritual* union involves some very practical actions. Through our practical compassion and our action for justice, we share the very life of God:

No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another,
God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.
1 John 4:12

The theologian Stephen Long gives us a set of questions to ask of all our interactions with other people:

² In Shane Claiborne and Tony Campolo, *Red Letter Revolution: What if Jesus really meant what he said?* Thomas Nelson, 2012, p.7.

³ *True Prayer*, Morehouse Publishing, 1995, p.8.

Is charity furthered? Do our exchanges point us to our true source? Do [they] fit the mission Christ has entrusted to us? Do [they] allow us to participate in God's holiness and God's perfections? All Christian churches, orders and vocations cannot be faithful if they fail to ask and answer this question: How do our daily exchanges promote that charity which is a participation in the life of God?⁴

This last sentence captures a question at the heart of the Gospel: how do we embody God's love, faithfully and generously? For the Christian, our daily interactions in the workplace and the home, the shop and the factory, the community centre and the boardroom should be forming us more and more into human beings who can love. Through these exchanges, we are either sharing God's love or rejecting it.

Gospel

The story of Jesus' transfiguration offers us a vision of the physical world shining with God's light and God's glory. The timing of the story is significant, both in the Gospel of Matthew and in the church's pattern of readings.

Matthew places the story just before Jesus speaks to the disciples about His forthcoming death. Before Jesus walks the way of the cross, He gives His closest followers this 'mountain top' experience: a vision of the ultimate destination.

In the Church of England, the passage is read on the Sunday before Lent. In Roman Catholic churches it is a couple of weeks later. In each case, as we begin Lent, we are given a vision of where the journey ends. The Transfiguration expresses in *story* what this chapter has been describing in *concepts*. As we see

⁴ *Divine Economy: Theology and the Market*, Routledge, 2012, p.269.

Jesus glorified, we see the destination God has planned for those who love Him:

After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

Peter said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters – one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.'

While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!'

When the disciples heard this, they fell face down to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. 'Get up,' he said. 'Don't be afraid.' When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, 'Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.'

Matthew 17:1-9

This passage presents us with a vision of a creation transformed and renewed in Christ, a physical world which shines with the divine glory. While it speaks of a universal promise, it is rooted in a very particular story.

The presence of Elijah and Moses – representing both the Prophets and the Law – reminds us that Jesus is rooted in the community of Israel, a people formed by God's calling and His promise.

Stories are the essence of the Bible. The medium is part of the message. All too often we want to rush past these specifics, the unpronounceable names and often perplexing narratives. We want to tidy the Bible up and make it simpler – boiling down its complexity and variety to find a ‘spiritual essence’. But the untidiness of Scripture, and the specificity of its stories, is part of the revelation. We need to face it, not evade it. Richard Chartres, the Bishop of London, has expressed this powerfully:

We want neat orderly systems which our minds can comprehend and God gives us Himself in the answer he gave to Moses – simply ‘I am’. We want absolute truth nailed down in propositional form and we are given a huge drama, a symphony of the many ways in which God has related to human kind. We want bottom lines for life and God gives us those and then moves beyond them to the law of love ... The Bible reveals truth, tragic and glorious; bloody and violent; nurturing and inspiring by breaking in upon our understanding from another realm and taking us by surprise.⁵

Stories

If stories are the essence of the Bible, they must also be the essence of theology. To speak of God’s love, we need lived examples as well as abstract ideas. That’s why each chapter of this book includes a story of modern discipleship, set alongside the Gospel passage.

In this chapter, we have chosen the story of two Church of England parishes in the poorest neighbourhoods of Bradford

⁵ Sermon at launch of St Mellitus College, London, 2 July 2008.

and of London. As we read these stories, we see at once how the spiritual and the physical are intimately connected. Transfiguration has a social and a personal dimension.

St Peter's, Bethnal Green

In 2012, a project called *Leaves on the Line* mapped life expectancy in the areas around each of London's Tube stations. In the journey between two adjacent stops – Liverpool Street in the City of London and Bethnal Green in the East End – life expectancy drops by seven years. According to the Church Urban Fund, the parish of St Peter's Bethnal Green is in the top one per cent in terms of the prevalence of child poverty. As Adam and Heather Atkinson tell their church's story, we see at once how the spiritual and the physical are intimately connected. Transfiguration has a social and a personal dimension.

When Adam and Heather Atkinson led a 'restart' of this inner-city parish – as part of a church planting process instigated by Holy Trinity Brompton – their first task was to *listen*. Adam explains, 'This was our way of expressing the centrality of face-to-face relationships, and the building of genuine mutuality. The idea was that we wanted to really *know* what the concerns of the local community were, rather than simply presuming – and to work with the community to achieve real and lasting change.'

The process of listening to congregation members and to the wider parish was itself understood as an attempt to discern what God was already doing in Bethnal Green, and what He had laid on its people's hearts. A range of other activities have helped to deepen the church's life of corporate prayer and discernment – both setting up 'Life Groups' (cell groups with Bible study and sharing of experience at their heart) and holding events in which the riches of both the catholic and charismatic traditions could be shared across the church.

Two key issues that emerged from this process of listening were a concern about the safety of local streets and a growing amount of food poverty – individuals and families who could not afford to eat.

Because St Peter's is committed to acting *with* the poorest and not simply *for* them, the church joined London Citizens (the capital's community organising alliance – see text box). This brought it into relationship with other institutions in the area, including schools and colleges. Soon, it became clear that school pupils also had fears about safety. Young people were asked to pinpoint on a map areas where they felt especially threatened. The results showed that they were particularly worried about crossing one of the main roads in the area – Hackney Road. It emerged that some pupils would take several buses to avoid walking across the road, which was a gang boundary. For a short period of time, one of the local schools worked with local police, and the shift pattern of officers was changed. This led to a striking reduction in crime.

Introducing Community Organising

London Citizens is the capital's community organising movement – part of the national Citizens UK alliance. Community organising involves building an alliance of religious congregations, schools and civic associations to work together on issues of common concern. It seeks to build a 'relational culture': encouraging people to share their stories, through one-to-one conversations (see Chapter Two) and then to come together and identify the ways in which their areas can be changed for the better. When people with common concerns are in relationship, they are in a position to challenge those with the power to deliver change (be that environmental improvements, better pay for workers, or improved public services).

While the campaigns are on specific, winnable issues, the wider goal is to build a local and national alliance with an ongoing set of relationships of trust and commitment – where each successful campaign not only brings a tangible result (such as improved social housing or higher wages) but develops grassroots leadership and the power of people in Britain’s poorest neighbourhoods to work together for the common good.

St Peter’s has tried to tackle the issue of food poverty in three different ways – supporting local Foodbanks, campaigning through London Citizens for a Living Wage and against exploitative lending, and by setting up a monthly community meal after Sunday worship. The congregation are asked to bring enough food with them to share. The intention is to provide so much that there is food left over for people to box up and use during the week.

As Adam says, the Community Lunch is ‘by no means the answer to every food-related problem, but it’s a start at making things easier. This has also been a great way of integrating new members into the church, getting younger and older people to interact over some food and conversation. We think Foodbanks are valuable but we want to do more than simply make a one-way donation. We want to build relationships, and see what we can do together.’

He goes on to explain that practical care and action to tackle injustice ‘help people to experience something of the Kingdom of God. But we also want people to know the King for themselves.’ It is not that social action occurs *in order to* convert people. Rather, social action and sharing the faith are both practical expressions of the church’s faith and love. Three years in, the evidence is that this approach is bearing fruit. The Sunday congregation has more than doubled, with growth

across ages, races and social classes – and many more people (of all faiths and none) work in partnership with the church.

St Stephen's, West Bowling

West Bowling is an area just to the south-east of Bradford. This diverse and deprived neighbourhood is perhaps one of the most challenging places in the country in which to minister. The early 2000s saw a significant change in the way St Stephen's saw its ministry to the local community.

Up until the end of the 1990s St Stephen's was a 'traditional Anglican church' with a good teaching ministry which called for a faithful response. The problem was that fewer and fewer people were responding. There was a gradually dwindling congregation and therefore a smaller and smaller capacity to reach out to the wider parish with practical love. The connection between this spirituality and the reality of the context became increasingly strained as the years went on. The congregation became older and less able to maintain both the building and a lively community of faith. It slowly edged towards crisis.

In 2004 when Jimmy Hinton took over as vicar, the church was in a perilous state. The Diocese of Bradford had indicated that this was 'make or break' for St Stephen's. Jimmy worked in ministry closely with his wife Sarah, and the Hintons were given three years to turn things round.

The first thing the Hintons did was to open the church doors and welcome everyone into the building. They focussed their work on developing a presence in the community: they started children's work, opened their own home and even installed a snooker table in the church to encourage people inside. They set themselves the task of building relationships with local people and offering hospitality and welcome. Gradually people started to come to church because of the ethos of welcome that had been generated.

Out of this developed a more grounded spirituality that took seriously the brokenness and the pain of the context. It was an incarnate spirituality which sought the presence of God in the relationships that had been built with local people. This is a spirituality that is meaningful to those who live in the area. People there are keen to belong to a community based on principles of loving acceptance, and this has enabled many to begin to experience joy and mutually supportive friendships.

The church is now at the centre of local community life and provides a hub around which much of the life and vitality of the neighbourhood revolves. It expresses a spirituality which is embodied in the reality of people's lives. In doing so, it speaks the truth of Christian faith in ways that are actively engaged with the complexity and diversity of the context.

Action

What does this story mean for us? How do we live out this vision – of physical and spiritual 'transfiguration' – in our local context?

Stephen Long's question supplies our starting point: *how do our daily exchanges promote that charity which is a participation in the life of God?* It invites us to begin, not with *action*, but with *observation*. Before we seek to do anything new, we need to look for the signs of God's life in our 'daily exchanges' – in the encounters we have in our homes, our workplaces, our neighbourhoods and our church. Only when we have discerned where God is at work will we know how and where to follow as disciples.

A discipline you could take up during Lent (or indeed at any time of year) is the use of the Examen. This simple process is described in the text box below. It provides a structure for reviewing the events and encounters of each day, to discern

where God has been at work. It also helps us to identify the points at which we have frustrated that work so that we can repent and learn from our mistakes, asking God not only for forgiveness, but also for a change of habits and of heart. The Examen weaves together the physical and the spiritual, the holy and the day-to-day. It can help us to put the ideas contained within this chapter into practice in our own lives, in a simple, concrete way.

Each chapter of the book ends with a suggestion for practical action, and whether you are using *Just Love* for individual devotion or reading it in a group, we suggest that you use the Examen as this chapter's practical exercise. It is, of course, primarily about *personal* change. The stories of St Peter's and St Stephen's remind us that transfiguration also has a corporate dimension. How do we discern and respond to God in our work for social transformation?

The Examen: A spiritual exercise for the end of each day⁶

Developed by St Ignatius, The Examination of Consciousness (Examen) is intended as a short period of reflection, used for 10-15 minutes at the end of each day. It is a simple, practical way to seek and find God in all things and to gain the freedom to let God's will be done on earth. The Examen has five steps:

1. Recall that you are in the presence of God. No matter where you are, you are a creature in the midst of creation and the Creator who called you forth is concerned for you.
2. Give thanks to God for favours received. Pause and spend a moment looking at this day's gifts. Take stock of what you received and gave.

⁶ Based on a guide to the Examen by St Ignatius' Church, Boston (USA).

3. Ask for awareness of the Holy Spirit's aid. Before you explore the mystery of the human heart, ask to receive the Holy Spirit so that you can look upon your actions and motives with honesty and patience. The Spirit gives a freedom to look upon yourself without condemnation and complacency and thus to be open to growth.
4. Now examine how you have lived this day. Recalling the events of your day, explore the context of your actions. Review the day, hour by hour, searching for the internal events of your life. Look through the hours to see your interaction with what was before you. Ask what you were involved in and who you were with, and review your hopes and hesitations. What moved you to act the way you did?
5. Pray words of reconciliation and resolve. Having reviewed this day of your life, look upon yourself with compassion and see your need for God and try to realise God's manifestations of concern for you. Express sorrow for sin, give thanks for grace, and praise God for the times you responded in ways that allowed you to better see God's life.

The Atkinsons' ministry at St Peter's began with a *listening* exercise. At the heart of this process was face-to-face engagement – both one-to-one conversations and discussions in small groups. The aim of this process was not just to discern people's needs, but also to develop the capacity of church members and others in Bethnal Green to act together for change. Surrounded by prayer and reflection, this process functioned as a kind of corporate Examen.

In the final chapter, we describe a simple tool which helps churches to listen to their neighbours and to take action with them for the common good. This chapter has cast some light on why these practical issues are of such spiritual significance. The

struggle for a more just society is an essential part of the church's calling – part of what it means to be co-workers with God, making the whole of creation radiant with His glory and His love. But that corporate struggle must begin with a personal commitment, and personal devotion. The Atkinsons and the Hintons, and the many others with whom they built these powerful community ministries, were first of all people of prayer: people who looked and listened to discern where God was at work in their everyday encounters. The personal and the communal aspects of ministry must go together. Practices such as the Examen enable us to root our work for social justice in a prayerful and personal walk with Jesus Christ.

Using this book in a small group: a short guide

Whether in Lent or at another time in the year, this book is designed to be used by small groups as well as individuals. We suggest 60 to 90 minutes is the ideal time for such gatherings, and you may find the following structure helpful:

- Begin with a short prayer, including a few moments of silence, to enable people to remember they are in God's presence and to lay before Him any distractions or concerns that the events of the day have generated. Ask God's blessing on the discussion, and pray that it may lead to practical action.
- In week one, invite everyone to give their name, the neighbourhood in which they live (if all from one church) or a church or other organisation they are involved in, and one thing that makes them angry or sad about the state of their neighbourhood.
- Read aloud, slowly, the Gospel passage under discussion in the chapter, having asked each person to listen and identify one sentence that stands out for them in the passage, and to say why it stands out. (This is a simple, non-threatening way to encourage everybody to participate in the group right from the start.) After the passage is read, leave a short time of silence before asking people to start sharing.
- Move on to discuss that week's chapter of the book. Encourage people to read the chapter in advance, but don't assume everyone will! Make sure that someone in the group has been briefed to begin the discussion with a clear,

well-structured presentation of the key points in the chapter – (1) the aspect of love being discussed; (2) what the Introduction says about that aspect of love; (3) what light the Gospel reading casts on that aspect of love; (4) how the stories reveal that love being embodied in the lives of individuals and communities; and (5) what questions that raises for us today. (This should last no more than five minutes.)

- Some of the ‘Actions’ (e.g. the Examen in Chapter One, and the silence in Chapter Two) can be carried out within a small group. Others (e.g. the ‘one to one’ in Chapter Two) need to be carried out during the week. The final action (the Money Talk) would need to be planned as a separate event. Depending on the action, leave enough time to either do it during the session or to discuss how people will do it later on.
- Finish with a time of prayer (this might end with the Grace or the Lord’s Prayer).

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