

She sat down next to me! Did you hear me? She sat down NEXT TO ME!!

To gain a full understanding of those words you must come back with me to 1972 and the Queen Victoria Public House at the back of the Town Hall in Leeds on a Sunday evening in March. There were gathered the debating teams from St Michael's College, Grammar School for boys, and their arch but friendly rivals from Notre Dame Ladies High School. The two teams had been practising for their forthcoming semi-finals in the Leeds Junior Chamber of Commerce Debating Competition. Preparations over, we were relaxing on the customary Vith formers way. Two of our number were going out with girls from the Notre Dame team. Hence the idea of a get together. One of them, unattached at present, was stunning in looks, elegant in demeanour, witty in conversation and a possible Oxbridge candidate. And she sat down next to me!

Despite being the main speaker and summer-up for the debating team I was fiercely shy, had no small talk and little self esteem. I naturally assumed she had come over to get close to someone else. It took half the evening for me to realise she was interested in me! We met up a few times and got on really well. But a few months later I was on a plane to Rome to begin my studies at the English College and she a year later went to the LSE. But, on that never to be forgotten evening, she had come across and sat down next to me!

Cardinal John Carmel Heenan, one time Bishop of Leeds, Archbishop of Liverpool (responsible for the building of Liverpool Cathedral aka 'Paddy's Wigwam') and Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster in the 1960's, was asked in a television-interview what was the hardest thing he had to believe as a Catholic Cardinal. "The hardest thing find to believe," he answered, "Is that God loves me". Belief in God and the practise of one's faith was much more widespread in those days than it has since become. What His Eminence was pointing out was the difficulty of thinking that God, with so much to be concerned about, has any regard for me, among the millions upon millions of other people. How can the Infinite, all-powerful, creator of heaven and earth have any knowledge of me, let alone love me.

It is not just that God is so mighty. Like me in the Queen Victoria that Sunday evening, most of us, most of the time have little regard for ourselves. Whatever the bluster we manage, we know our insignificance in the great order of things. So how can God love me?

John, the author of our second reading tells us that this is how God is. The nature of God is love. And John, the Gospel-writer, tells us of Jesus' command to love one another in the way that he has loved us. His love was to be total. "Greater love has no one than that they lay down their life for their friends".

Realising that God's love is of a different order than the love we can manage, the early Church coined a new word for it. That word is '*agape*'. God's love, they knew, was of a different type altogether from the love they knew and experienced in their ordinary lives. When we love we feel it. Our hearts lift; we feel emotion. The world looks and feels a different place to the one who is in love, as many a romantic song makes clear.

God does not change, the philosophers assure us. So God does not feel better for loving his people, individually or collectively. Since it is God's nature to love, love is God's constant state of being. What then makes *agape* different to our love in this world: a mother's love for her child, a fan's love for their football team; someone's delight in their hobby?

The difference is that '*agape*' has nothing to do with feelings. Feelings come and go. We are not entirely in control of how we feel. But '*agape*' is a choice, a decision, a commitment. It is an act of the will. "I chose you" says Jesus.

Now this might begin to sound as if the choice of God is exclusive, some are chosen and (inevitably) some are not. The first reading today squashes that idea. The paradigm shift in the thinking of Peter, and subsequently the whole Church, was to realise, with a little visionary help, that God has no favourites. That is, all are God's chosen; all are loved by God. All can share in the abundant love of God, if they are willing to choose to love God in return by keeping the commandments he has lovingly given.

Someone once wrote about the worse things that anyone can experience. Among those experiences was: *not to be loved by the one you love*. Unrequited love can drive you crazy. When we know we are loved by the one we love the world is a very different place. Psalm 139 is a statement telling the opposite story of that of unrequited love:
Oh where can I go from your spirit? / where can I hide from your face?
If I climb the heavens you are there; / If I lie in the grave you are there.

Christ's death for our sake and his Resurrection to show the way to new and eternal life is the invincible sign of the totality of God's love for all whom God has lovingly made, and lovingly sustains. God is love; and, to our constant surprise and delight, God comes and sits down by each one of us.