

## **‘Perfect Love’**

*A sermon delivered at Pembroke College chapel, Oxford, Trinity Term, 2013*

### **Job 12: 7-10**

“But ask the animals, and they will teach you,  
or the birds in the sky, and they will tell you;  
or speak to the earth, and it will teach you,  
or let the fish in the sea inform you.

Which of all these does not know  
that the hand of the LORD has done this?  
In his hand is the life of every creature  
and the breath of all mankind.”

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### **1 John 4: 16-24**

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

We love because he first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

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**Thanks for letting** me speak today. My name is Gabriel and I am a third year DPhil student in English.

Over the summer I visited Texas to look at the manuscripts of T.H. White, who wrote *The Once and Future King*.

One of the things I looked at were White’s journals. On one page he had written a message that simply said ‘Died Saturday November 25<sup>th</sup> after 12 years of perfect love’.

I want to talk about what ‘perfect love’ might mean. We heard the phrase in the second reading, which can be interpreted in different ways – but my understanding is that perfect love, real love, means loving without fear. But what does that mean, and how do we do it?

Next to the message there is a large tuft of brown fur tied with a blue ribbon. White’s message was not about a human, but his dog ‘Brownie’.

In 1981 the American actor Jimmy Stewart recited a poem about his dog on a television talk-show:

*He'd wake up at night  
And he would have this fear  
Of the dark, of life, of lots of things,  
And he'd be glad to have me near*

*And now he's dead  
And there are nights when I think  
I feel him climb upon our bed  
And lie between us  
And I'd pat his head*

*And there are nights when I think I feel that stare  
And I reach out to stroke his hair  
And he's not there*

In this example, Jimmy's dog feels fear, but not in the relationship he has with Jimmy.

Sometimes there are fears in human relationships. People are afraid that their girlfriends or boyfriends will leave them, or that their friends will stop liking them. They may be afraid that they are not being kind enough, or that they are being too kind and are being walked over. At the moment I am afraid that you might not like this sermon. There may be a million fears that people have in human relationships. Occasionally people may enter into 'perfect love' with other humans, divorced of fear, but I think it is more easily found with animals. This does not mean that the relationship between a human and an animal has no fear *around* it, but rather that fears are felt outside the relationship rather than within.

There is something else in Jimmy's poem. The dog's fears are not expelled by Jimmy; he is simply glad to be near his human, and Jimmy is glad to have his dog. This isn't a love that fixes everything. Fears of the dark, and indeed of life, cannot be wiped away. The world is a scary place, and I'm not just talking about what we see on the news. I mean, the fear that I think all of us feel, that we are going to be alone in the end, that there is nothing between us and the trackless void of space, that there is no meaning, that we are wasting our ever diminishing time on this earth. Even if you have answers to those fears – and we have heard this term from both theists and secular humanists – I don't believe anyone who says that they are not at all afraid and overwhelmed by life and death. Perfect love, love without fear, does not fix everything, but it is a comfort because it means we can face the real fears together with other beings, whether human, animal, or divine.

I am not a theologian but I am sure there are many examples of God's love being 'perfect' in this way. For example in Psalm 23:

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I fear no evil, for You are with me;  
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.*

God does not fix David's problem: the valley of the shadow of death still exists. Instead, God is simply 'with' David, and that itself is a comfort because they face the real evil and fear together.

You might say it is convenient that the kind of love expressed by God in these lines is also the kind of love a non-existent God, or even an imaginary friend, might express. God doesn't fix anything. His presence is simply felt by David, but if he doesn't do anything then what is the point?

Well sometimes this kind of love can do a lot.

I'm going to use an example of this type of love between humans, in the film *Little Miss Sunshine*. In that film, a dysfunctional family travel across America to attend a beauty pageant for their young daughter. On the way the teenage son discovers that he is colour-blind and so will not be able to fly planes in the airforce. He has taken a vow of silence for the last year until he achieves this goal, and now he learns that the whole thing has been for nothing; that his plans have collapsed; that his life is now meaningless. He breaks his vow of silence with a swear word and jumps out of the car that the family is driving to the beauty pageant. He runs out into the desert and lies there, telling his parents to leave him. Because they feel responsibility and love for him, they can't leave him in the desert; but they also need to get him back into the car or their daughter's dreams will be ruined as well. They try to convince him, speaking rationally. He ignores them. Then the young girl goes down to speak with him. Her parents tell her not to, that they've said everything, that he won't listen. She goes down anyway. It is she who has the most to lose if her brother does not come back into the car with them.

All she does is sit next to him, leaning her head to his side so that he knows she is there. There is no expectation, no message, other than 'I am here'. A few seconds later the boy gets up with her and goes back to the car.

Nothing has been fixed – the boy's life plans are still ruined. The girl has not found some brilliant loophole or changed the rules about air-force recruitment. Unlike her parents, she did not fear failing to persuade him to come. It was much simpler, more direct than that. It was a recognition of her brother's fear that his life has no meaning, and it was an act of comfort that said, and only said 'I am here'.

I see in this relationship the same love that we have with our pets, and the same love that God might have for us.

In Michaelmas term, one of my cats, and one of my best friends, was diagnosed with cancer. He was operated on but the tumours could not be removed. At the end of last term his suffering increased and we took him to the vets to be put down.

At the time I was ill with a painful throat infection, and confined to the settee. Plato, my cat, was of course in a much worse situation. I suppose the cancer had spread to his bones because he was struggling to walk and could not get up the stairs.

Yet somehow he had the strength to jump up onto the settee with me, and lie next to me, very close to my face. Maybe he was scared and wanted to be close to me. Maybe

he was concerned about my illness and wanted to comfort me. Maybe we was just cold and wanted the warmth of my body. I don't think it really matters. He was close to me, and comforted me; and I hope I comforted him.

I could not fix the situation he was in – his cancer – nor could he fix my problems. All he said to me was 'I am here'.

My great uncle wrote the following about death, in a book he wrote about how he became an Orthodox priest:

*It is death, the ultimate trauma of life, which brings us before the problem of God, and one is forced to either of two conclusions*

*a) There is nothing and nobody and we are the result of blind combustion or chance, or*

*b) There is a purpose, a plan, since we come from a source of life, and shall be gathered up again to this ultimate source of our being*

*In point of fact the second alternative is the more credible, since it postulates a Mystery, explains the love and compassion which lie deep in the human heart, and necessitates a compelling compassionate and loving Being as the source of man's being.*

Personally, I don't know if b) is really more credible than a), and I doubt whether those are really the only two choices. However, I chose to believe in b). I do not know, but I trust that there is a meaning, and that we mortal creatures are, somehow, more than we seem.

I see, in the love between humans and animals, the same love that exists between God and humans. C.S. Lewis postulated that animals may be granted everlasting life with God, because they have grown into personhood through relationships with humans, just as we humans grow into our full potential through a spiritual relationship with God.

This may be true. I hope it is; but I do not know. I fear what may or may not happen after death. I fear that Plato has dissolved into atoms, gone forever. The Victorian poet Alfred Tennyson wrote *In Memoriam* after the death of his best friend. The lines seemed particularly apposite to me after the death of one of my best friends. I will end with them, as they summarise my own thinking and position better than I can.

*Oh yet we trust that somehow good  
Will be the final goal of ill,  
To pangs of nature, sins of will,  
Defects of doubt, and taints of blood;*

*That nothing walks with aimless feet;  
That not one life shall be destroyed,  
Or cast as rubbish to the void,  
When God hath made the pile complete;*

*That not a worm is cloven in vain;  
That not a moth with vain desire*

*Is shrivelled in a fruitless fire,  
Or but subserves another's gain.*

*Behold, we know not anything;  
I can but trust that good shall fall  
At last—far off—at last, to all,  
And every winter change to spring.*

*So runs my dream: but what am I?  
An infant crying in the night:  
An infant crying for the light:  
And with no language but a cry.*

