

20th June 2022

Charity

**“Come down, O Love Divine,
Seek out this soul of mine,
And visit it with thine own ardour glowing.”**

Bianco da Siena, *Come down, O Love Divine* (as translated by Frederick Littledale)

I conducted a wedding service a while back in which I read St Paul's wonderful poetic words from 1 Corinthians 13 about the “greatest gift”. It is, of course, about love, and is arguably the most impressive expression of the meaning and purpose of love that the English language has ever heard. I read the lesson from the *New International Version* of the Bible where love is the central theme. After the marriage ceremony, an elderly relative took me aside to thank me for the service, and said, “And I'm glad you chose to read 1 Corinthians 13. Wonderful message! But I'm sure you'll agree that it was always better when 'charity' was used – in the old version, you know? 'Charity' has a ring to it that 'love' can't match.”

This comment came back to me when I sang the fifteenth century hymn by Bianco da Siena in church service recently – *Discedi, Amor Santo*, “Come down, O Love Divine”. I was struck by the language of third verse:

*Let holy charity
mine outward vesture be,
and lowliness become mine inner clothing;
true lowliness of heart,
which takes the humbler part,
and o'er its own shortcomings weeps with loathing.*

In these words, it seemed to me, the wedding guest's wish to have “charity” rather than “love” found its echo. For here is a depth of meaning, attitude and purpose that “love” can't get near. And when the “outward vesture” is “holy charity”, then the “inner clothing” is one of lowliness, peace of mind, fulfilment, and all that gives life true meaning.

It's more than expressions of love, even in the best of human forms. It about “holiness”, a charity that is God-given – Bianco da Siena's “Love Divine” with a capital “L” – encompassing us, so that lives are changed for the better. Charity, indeed, “has a ring to it that love can't match”.

A prayer for today

*Surround me now, living God, by your Holy Charity,
that I might be blessed and know how to share what love means. Amen*