

GOD'S TENDERNESS

Why is the word “tenderness” rarely mentioned in the Bible? Can we make any judgement about God’s tenderness? We talk to **Father Tadeusz Dola**, Professor Emeritus of Theology and head of the Theological Sciences Committee of the Polish Academy of Sciences.



In her Nobel lecture, Olga Tokarczuk said: “Tenderness is the most modest form of love. It is the kind of love that does not appear in the scriptures or the gospels, no one swears by it, no one cites it.”¹ But is that really the case? Is there no tenderness in the Bible?

TADEUSZ DOLA: It's true that the word “tenderness” itself is almost absent from the Bible, but there is certainly metaphorical imagery which reveals the Lord's infinite tenderness to humankind. Although the Bible frequently stresses God's transcendence and the chasm separating Him from the world He created, including humanity, there are also passages which seem to contradict this by describing His incredible, even intimate closeness to humankind. In the Book of Isaiah, the prophet compares the Lord's relationship with people to a bond between a mother and child. His words are an example of a Biblical metaphor which can be interpreted as tender care extended by God towards people as they experience loneliness and helplessness. This can also be said about the description of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, whom Christians see as the Son of God. The natural, spontaneous human response to seeing a new-born baby is tenderness, affection, kindness. This scene suggests that as the Lord treats us with tenderness, He also expects tender love in return.

Theology strives to reconcile the paradox of God's transcendence and immanence, His detachment from the world which is incomprehensible to us, and His almost tangible presence in the human world. In its main field of study, in which Christian faith is interpreted and explained rationally, theology strives to understand how an infinitely transcendental God can be described using discourse which stands up to the rigorous requirements of academic discussion. Such descriptions veer away from topics which evade rational speculation. This is why systematic theology – a specific field of theological research – rarely mentions tenderness. However, the term is frequently found in theological studies into mysticism. Mysticism is a phenomenon studied by theologians, religious scholars, psychologists and philosophers. One of its notable scholars was Leszek Kořakowski, dedicating an entire chapter to it in his book “If There Is No God.” He described it as something rare yet universal: rare in the sense that not many religious people admit to having had mystical experiences, yet universal because it is also present in Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism. All major religions describe mystical experiences.

Following Kořakowski, we can define mysticism as a very close encounter with God. It is accompa-

nied by a feeling of intense love and a desire to be fully united with God, or even to immerse oneself in Him as though in a boundless ocean. In its analysis of mystical experiences, theology first reaches for studies into the phenomenon by other fields. It regards mystical experiences as an encounter between an individual and true reality, rather than something which is a subjective figment of imagination, delusion, or illusion. This is sometimes described by mystics, although they frequently evade it, since – as they say themselves – the experience cannot be expressed in words. And since such an intense experience cannot be adequately named or described, they frequently invoke Biblical language and imagery.

Do you mean any section in particular?

The classic text cited by mystics is the Song of Songs. It is highly unusual in that it doesn't mention God once. Instead, it is filled with descriptions of lovers yearning for one another. It's likely based on love songs accompanying nuptial rites. Although the word “tender”

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once again doesn't appear, what the texts say about love and yearning is saturated with tenderness. Lovers address one another in myriad ways: he is usually her dear, her beloved, her friend, while she is his friend, his sister, his bride. The Song of Songs is often interpreted following Jewish exegesis as an expression of God's love for the chosen nation: God is the Bridegroom, and Israel – as the nation – is the bride chosen and beloved by God.

Christianity attempts an allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs, and this is especially common among mystics. For example, the 16th-century Spanish mystic John of the Cross believed that in the Song of Songs, the Bride is a representation of the human soul, yearning to be united with God in Christ, who is portrayed as the Bridegroom. All the exultations in the book can describe the soul seeking and yearning for God.

When we talk about the Bridegroom and the Bride, we are still aware of the fact that God is very close to us while remaining transcendental. This is why Judaism and Christianity are wholly devoid of writings such as those found in Greek mythology, describing gods

¹ English trans. Jennifer Croft and Antonia Lloyd-Jones, www.nobelprize.org. © The Nobel Foundation 2019.



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interacting with people directly, bodily and erotically. Such encounters would be unthinkable in the Bible. The only reason the Song of Songs is included in the Old Testament is that erotic themes are explored very indirectly. This is also likely why it is a favorite of mystics. Inspired by the Song of Songs, their descriptions of being close to God, imbued with intense love, are entirely free of any erotic elements, instead expressing becoming fully one with God on the spiritual level. This can be said of John of the Cross, Teresa of Ávila and Edith Stein.

Tenderness is usually associated with specific physical acts such as touching, embracing and kissing. How does Christianity perceive such gestures in human relationships?

In Christianity, the model for relationships between people is God's infinite love for humankind. This

basic tenet is mainly interpreted by theologians on the basis of the Bible, but they also occasionally draw upon the writings of mystics. One such theologian and philosopher was Karol Wojtyła, later Pope John Paul II. His academic writings start with commentaries on texts by John of the Cross. Analysis of his texts reveal that encountering the mysticism of John of the Cross made a powerful impression on his philosophical and theological views of the relationship between humankind and God and between people. This is reflected in certain ideas and phrasings in his papal catechesis under the general title "Man and Woman He Created Them." Reaching back to the creation of the world and humankind, the Pope believed that people discover the Lord as their Creator, who has brought them into being from nothing through infinite good and love. They see their existence in this world as an unexplained gift from God – God who is love and who bestows life out of this love. This primal experience of love and being given it by the Lord allows us to discover the sense of our existence as imitating Him by loving others. The idea of "giving oneself" to someone else, rooted in love, has a particular significance in relationships between men and women. John Paul II contemplates it from a range of perspectives. While he does not explore the aspect of tenderness in his catechesis, he did so many years earlier when he lectured in ethics at the Catholic University in Lublin. These thoughts were published as "Love and Responsibility." In the section "Tenderness and Sensuality," he analyzes the role of tenderness in our lives, in particular in relationships between men and women. He understands them as co-experiencing another person's feelings and spiritual experiences; as entering their emotional and spiritual life. My "self" becomes a part of another's "self." Their experiences become mine, and I experience what they do. A genuine feeling of tenderness carries the need to communicate to the other person that I share their state of mind, that I feel the same way they do. And we manifest this co-experience by gestures such as taking their hand, embracing or kissing them; these gestures show the other person that their spiritual life is incredibly important and close to us.

Tenderness is a specific dimension of love, and it is only genuine when it stems from love towards the person we are tender towards. The gesture of tenderness is selfless, and it is not done out of a desire to satisfy one's own needs, which are frequently purely sensual. We must place the other person's wellbeing at the forefront. There are people whose lives are particularly difficult, and we have a duty to show them tenderness. I am talking about people who are ill, suffering, lonely. Tenderness is natural in families, first between the couple and later shared between parents and children.

Pope Francis also discusses tenderness; known for his spontaneous statements, he tells us we need a “revolution of tenderness.” During his visit to Dublin in 2018, he spoke to families about the need for couples to show tenderness to one another, since it is a specific dimension of love. The same year, Assisi hosted an academic conference titled “The Theology of Tenderness in Pope Francis,” discussing the great need for tenderness in today’s world.

How can we experience God’s tenderness?

This is a common theme in the contemplations of both John Paul II and Francis. According to Christian doctrine, humankind experiences the Lord’s tenderness when we realize that He loves us; the greatest and most specific expression of this love is God’s forgiveness for our trespasses. When God forgives us, He forgets even the worst wickedness. “Though your sins are like scarlet, They shall be as white as snow,” says the Lord through the prophet Isaiah. The Lord forgives even those sins which others do not forgive and we cannot forgive ourselves.

One way this is shown in the gospels is the scene where Jesus Christ encounters a woman accused of adultery. According to Mosaic law, she must be stoned to death, but Christ’s compassion saves her. His words stop her accusers from casting stones, while the woman experiences the love and forgiveness of God. The episode is an example of Christ’s teachings of a merciful God who does not wish for sinners’ death, but rather for repentance. Another important example of such understanding of God is the parable of the prodigal son. Christ tells the story of a young man who has squandered away his inheritance. He finds himself destitute, and returns to his father with the intention of begging him to accept him back as a servant. “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.” The father is so moved by his younger son’s return, he embraces and kisses him – a clear expression of tenderness. The parable is read as a metaphorical description of the Lord as a merciful Father awaiting the return of his sinful son. The Father is tender towards the son, since He is so moved by seeing him, and He shows this tenderness by embracing and kissing him. And we can assume that the son, experiencing merciful forgiveness in the tender gestures of the Father, reciprocates with a tender embrace and kiss.

So tenderness may be understood as being similar to mercy?

We experience the Lord’s tenderness when we believe that He forgives us. We feel the tenderness of merciful God when we rise up from sin and wish to return to Him, seeing Him as a merciful Father. We return to

the Lord because we know that He loves us infinitely and forgives us even the greatest wrongdoing; He still trust us when no one else will.

Do we need more tenderness in these times?

I suppose so, but I wouldn’t want to generalize. Any discussion of tenderness should go back to Pope Francis and his calls for a “revolution of tenderness.” He has made his appeal since he sees that the world is becoming insensitive to human tragedies. Many societies seem indifferent to the suffering and death of refugees forced to flee their homes because of war or persecution. Psychologists and psychiatrists are also raising concerns about our mental health in the face of temptation from the virtual world, which some of us escape to instead of dealing with real-life problems. Spending long hours in a fictional world alienates us from our surroundings and limits contact with other people, even family. Simple human impulses become increasingly unnatural, and displaying and reciprocating tenderness is certainly one part of that.

Love, expressed as tenderness, is the central message of the Bible.

What does the Catholic Church believe to be a source of tenderness?

We are encouraged to show tenderness by the Catechism – the most concise form of Christian doctrine. Its latest version mentions “the Lord’s tender love,” as expressed by the relationship between a man and a woman enshrined in marriage. Anyone who treats sexual life seriously and respects others’ dignity and rights is also “witness to God’s loving kindness.” For the Catholic Church, the source of humankind’s tenderness is that of the Lord Himself; according to Pope Francis, this is a “concrete existential asset” of His love.

So, going back to your original question, it’s true that the Bible doesn’t tend to mention “tenderness” by name. However, we find its substance everywhere we encounter the Lord whose infinite love means He leans down mercifully on each and every one of us, especially those needing His help. Love, expressed as tenderness, is the central message of the Bible, describing God as being love, and us as being called to love the Lord and our neighbor.

INTERVIEW BY DR. JUSTYNA ORŁOWSKA

PHOTOS BY JAROSŁAW DELUGA-GÓRA

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