

*Jo. Did you ever know a prayer?*

*Never know nothink, Sir.*

*Not so much as one short prayer?*

*No, Sir. Nothink at all. Mr Chalbands he was a-prayin wunst at Mr.Sangsby's and I heerd him, but he sounded as if he was a-speakin' to hisself, and not to me. He prayed a lot but I couldn't make out nothink on it. Different times, there was other genlmen come down Tom-all-Alone's a-prayin, but they all mostly sed as t'other wuns prayed wrong, and all mostly sounded to be a-talking to theirselves, or a-passing blame on the t'others and not a-talkin to us. We never knowd nothink. I never knowd what it wos all about. (p.706)*

This is Jo, the crossing-sweeper, in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*, in a safe place at last being well looked after by what one presumes to be Dickens's 'take' on what a true Christian should be: people who've rescued Jo from the street and his enemies, not least himself, and are preparing him for his final peace. Mr. Chadband, in contrast, is full of words about God but, as Jo observes, he may as well be talking to himself as they have no effect whatever on the poor to whom he preaches; no effect because there's no real connection, no acts to accompany the words and demonstrate what love actually means.

*My children,  
our love is not to be just words or mere talk,  
but something real and active.*

That onus is on you as much as me, your preacher, and it's ultimately impossible unless Christ lives in us – not theoretically, not metaphorically, nor even literally (that should get you thinking) but as Spirit. That is, not as a separate being, but in a way that makes us one with God, God's action in the world. There are libraries on this but here it is in the words of the monk Thomas Merton whose life was very much an agony in making this come true (or so it seems to me) though not without great joy as well.

*It is essential to remember that for a Christian 'the word of the Cross' is nothing theoretical, but a stark and existential experience of union with Christ in his death in order to share in his Resurrection. To fully 'hear' and 'receive' the word of the Cross means much more than simple assent to the dogmatic proposition that Christ died for our sins. It means to be 'nailed to the Cross with Christ' so that the ego-self is no longer the principle of our deepest actions which now proceed from Christ living in us. ( Zen and the Birds of Appetite pp. 55-56)*

*Make your home in me as I make mine in you.*

This is the indwelling or abiding or remaining which is not explicable in human terms but has to be experienced in order to be known – not only to oneself but to others, or in the further words of Thomas Merton:

*It is essential to true Christianity that this experience of the Cross and of self- emptying be central in the life of the Christian so that he (or she) may receive fully the Holy Ghost and know (again by experience) all the richness of God in and through Christ.*

And elsewhere:

*. . . the deep 'I' of the spirit, of solitude and of love cannot be 'had', possessed, developed, perfected. It can only 'be' and 'act' according to deep inner laws which are not of man's containing, but which come from God.*

*(Disputed Questions, 207)*

There's much more, but this, I think, is what the symbolism of the vine and the branches is also trying to express.

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