

Love for love's sake and love for God's sake

We have just had some of our nephews to stay, along with their mum and dad. Our nephews attend a high school in Buckinghamshire and each of them is experiencing the various pressures that come hand in hand with education. Talking with each of them about their experiences of school reminded me of the mantra that I heard time and time again when I was a teenager at school in Hertfordshire: "The more you put in the more you'll get out". I'm afraid the words rather passed me by in those days; I bumbled along through my early education and didn't start taking my studies seriously until I had left school.

Those words "The more you put in the more you get out" underlie the industrial age surely? And in the western world we hope for our reward for hard work in material and career success. All that is fine as far as it goes - but does the mantra reach into parts of our lives and philosophy where it is less appropriate and potentially damaging? I am thinking of our relationships with family members, friends, associates and colleagues.

Understandably, we seek reward, satisfaction and pleasure from our loves, our friendships and other day to day encounters with people. What happens though, if we think we are not getting the rewards we seek from the efforts we are making? Might we be applying the mantra "The more you put in, the more you'll get out" to personal relationships in the wrong way?

Jesus taught about love a great deal. He taught that we should love our neighbour as we love ourselves. He taught that love must be sacrificial. For example, John, in the 15th chapter of his gospel records that Jesus said, "greater love has no-one than the one who lays down their life for their friends". And then there are these familiar words from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (I paraphrase): "Love is patient, love is kind, it is not self-seeking. Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes and it always perseveres".

This is love that keeps on going even when it seems there is no reward. This is love that doesn't necessarily fit with the mantra "The more you put in the more you'll get out". This is love that doesn't have permission to peter out or even cease when the going gets tough. Love like this is costly, it is not always fun, it may never reap its reward in the way that we hope or expect. But love like this reflects the love of God himself. His love offers healing, safety and hope, and he continues to love all people regardless of reward. Human love at its best and most authentic will be like the love of God himself, and it will even have God's own love as its foundation and model.

James