

About 10 years ago, in the USA, a kind of meta-study was conducted in which a team of social psychologists analysed nearly a hundred existing studies, carried out between 1988 and 2011, that looked at college students' attachment styles.

For those who are not familiar with attachment theory, it proposes four basic styles of relating to other people:

- Those with *secure attachment* feel they can depend on other people, and other people can depend on them, meaning they're able to make themselves emotionally vulnerable and to form close, trusting relationships.
- People with *dismissive or avoidant attachment* reject the idea that they need emotional connections, remaining aloof and independent of others.
- Those with an *anxious or preoccupied style* crave intimacy, but their fear of rejection makes them clingy and overly focused on validation.
- And those with a *disorganised or fearful attachment* style also crave close relationships, but their fear of rejection ultimately makes them push people away.

The researchers found that there had been a 15 per cent decrease in secure attachment since the late 80s, as well as significant spikes in dismissive attachment and fearful attachment—the two styles associated with lack of trust and self-isolation. Analyses of more recent data on attachment show that secure-attachment rates continue to drop, and fearful-attachment rates continue to rise.

There are different explanations for these worrying trends. Some point to a pervasive sense of precariousness as people grapple with global conflicts, rising interest rates and the uncertainty created by emerging technologies such as AI.

Others cite the distancing effects of smart phones and social media, the fact that more people are living alone, declining marriage and childbirth rates, and the increasing emphasis on setting 'boundaries' in relationships.

The good news, according to many psychologists, is that the trend can be reversed; that it's possible for people to change. When someone with attachment issues is gently encouraged to ignore their distrustful instincts and to make connections, and then when nothing bad happens, their attachment style can gradually be repaired and made more secure.

But, of course, there's an obvious risk in this approach. What happens when a person tentatively puts themselves on the line only to find that something bad *does* happen? What happens when their fears come true?

Other human beings, after all, are unpredictable. We cannot control their actions or responses to us. At best, other people—even the people we love the most—will probably disappoint us at some point; at their worst, people can be cruel and exploitative.

So what are we to do? How can we find the love and connection we crave when the search for love is so fraught with risk?

Few people have understood this dilemma better than the Holocaust survivor and psychotherapist Viktor Frankl. In *Man's Search for Meaning*, the book for which he is probably best known, he recalls an epiphany he experienced while being marched through mud and icy winds in the early hours of the morning as prison guards shouted at him and prodded him with their rifles. When the prisoner marching beside him said something that made Frankl think of his young wife, who had been taken to another camp, a surprising thought transfixed him:

For the first time in my life I saw the truth [he writes]—that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: *The salvation of man is through love and in love*. I understood how a man who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved. In a position of utter desolation, when man cannot express himself in positive action, when his only achievement may consist in enduring his sufferings in the right way—an honourable way—in such a position man can, through loving contemplation of the image he carries of his beloved, achieve fulfilment. For the first time in my life I was able to understand the meaning of the words, 'The angels are lost in perpetual contemplation of an infinite glory.'

After his liberation from the camp, Frankl would learn that his wife had died in Bergen-Belsen. His parents and brother had also perished. Surely such a shattering blow would have provided him with ample proof that terrible things can happen when you take the risk of love. You would expect such unimaginable loss and disappointment to have made him fearful, bitter and risk-averse when it came to loving again. And yet, throughout his life, Frankl remained convinced of the necessity of love, not just for survival but for a flourishing life.

The 'infinite glory' that he refers to in the passage I just quoted implies a transcendent kind of love, a love focused on something far beyond the physical

existence or presence of his wife. What he had been clinging to—what had got him through his darkest moments—was more than just the *object* of his love. It was Love itself.

As John says in our epistle reading this morning, ‘Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God *is* love.’

Notice he doesn’t say that God is loving—though of course that’s true too. What he says is much more profound, perhaps one of the most profound statements in the Bible: God *is* love.

This divine Love is revealed most powerfully, John tells us, in Jesus. Seeing our frailty—seeing how difficult it is for us to trust—God takes the initiative and comes to us in the person of Jesus, who, on the cross, shows us just how deep and wide and trustworthy God’s love is—a love that can endure and transform even the most terrible suffering.

‘God’s love was revealed among us in this way:’ John says. ‘God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that *he loved us* and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.’

This is a love large enough for us to *abide* in—to live our whole lives within—John tells us. It’s also a love that’s strong enough to defeat our fears: ‘There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us.’

The words ‘Fear not’ appear in the Bible more than a hundred times, but banishing fear is more easily said than done. Here, in John’s letter, though, we get a sense of *how* our fears can be overcome by the indwelling and unassailable love of God.

We also get a vivid sense of the intimacy of this love in the metaphor of the vine and its branches, which we find in our gospel passage. A branch separated from its vine dies; but when it’s firmly grafted into the vine, the vine becomes the source of everything the branch needs to live and bear fruit. The branch is not just connected to the vine; it becomes *part* of it. You could not ask for a more secure attachment than that!

God’s unfaltering love for us gives us the confidence and security to take the risk of loving others, even in the most unpromising circumstances.

Take, for instance, the unlikely encounter between Philip and the God-fearing Ethiopian eunuch in our first reading. Philip had recently fled Jerusalem in haste and was probably looking quite travel-worn and unkempt; the eunuch was also returning from Jerusalem, where he had gone to worship, and where he had acquired a valuable scroll of Isaiah. A man of high rank in the Ethiopian court, he would have looked the part in his finery, and with his servants and fancy chariot. Despite his position, though, and his obvious reverence for the God of the Jews, eunuchs were regarded as ritually unclean in Jewish law, and were excluded from the temple.

There were many reasons, then, for Philip and the eunuch to distrust each other. And yet, led by the Spirit, Philip boldly approaches the eunuch, who, in turn, boldly welcomes Philip into his chariot. On hearing Philip explain the Good News of Jesus Christ, the eunuch doesn't hesitate to ask for baptism, and Philip doesn't hesitate to oblige.

Here we see how the life-giving, indwelling love of Christ makes real relationship possible. It unlocks the prisons in which fear tries to enclose us and restores us to our true humanity.

A few days after Viktor Frankl was liberated from Dachau—a place of dehumanising fear and cruelty—he took a walk through the countryside near the camp.

There was no one to be seen for miles around [he recalls], there was nothing but the wide earth and sky and the larks' jubilation and the freedom of space. I stopped, looked around, and up to the sky—and then I went down on my knees. At that moment there was very little I knew of myself or of the world—I had but one sentence in mind—always the same: 'I called to the Lord from my narrow prison and He answered me in the freedom of space.'

How long I knelt there and repeated this sentence memory can no longer recall. But I know that on that day, in that hour, my new life started. Step for step I progressed, until I again became a human being.