

Desire can be another name for love

Trinity Sunday, May 31, 2026

at the Chapel at Churchill College, Cambridge

The Rev'd Canon Nigel Cooper, Chaplain:

Ps 27: 1, 4-9, 14

Isa 26: 7-9

Mt 13: 44-45

Back in 2005, about the time many of you were born, I was licensed as the new university chaplain to Anglia Ruskin University¹. I took the opportunity to preach the first of only two sermons I gave before that university. The second was on my retirement in 2022. I recently arranged for that sermon to be posted, with other sermons, on the chapel website – do take a look at them². But this got me thinking about the changes between 2005 and today. Today there is widespread gloom and anxiety; while within the church I think there is more confidence. I sense we know that we have something to offer and little competition in the market for hope.

Back then the main competition was shopping – “retail therapy” – although the New Atheism was also still drawing the crowds among the more intellectual. The economy felt buoyant (the 2008 crash was three years away). All was peace in Europe, and who cares about the rest of the world³. Climate change was known about, but it seemed a distant problem⁴. Of course, there were all the usual human miseries: ill health, relationship breakdowns, stress at work. But never mind, there was always shopping. This was relatively fresh entertainment

¹ It was called Anglia Polytechnic University, APU, back then.

² This is a second in a trilogy of sermons on the three theological virtues. The first one was on Trust.

³ I hope this is a pardonable exaggeration

⁴ The Stern Review came out in 2006 [The Economics of Climate Change: The Stern Review - Grantham Research Institute on climate change and the environment](#)

since the legalisation of Sunday Trading the previous decade, making it a great day out – thereby filling the gap left by the abandonment of churchgoing.

And uni in 2005? A great, cheap way to spend three years pretending to live as an adult while maintaining teenage pursuits such as sleeping in, getting laid and getting smashed (you would not believe how much students drank then). In that context, how could I connect?

I began with Bernini's sculpture of the *Ecstasy of St Teresa* (of Avila). Do you know it? Can you picture it in your mind or get it up on your phone⁵? Teresa is swooning in rapture with an angel over her about to stab her heart with a spear. I first saw this as an impressionable sixteen-year-old on television⁶, this vision of sex and orgasm. "Oh, Teresa!"⁷ The sculpture is a visualisation of and a stimulation of desire. And desire seemed to be the theme emotion of that time, and so the link I was looking for between the world of those students and of religion. Of course, desire is not insignificant in our own day, so I am reusing this link in the hope it may still strike some chord in you.

Desire was the engine of the economy. Satisfaction of many desires was in the reach of all, if advertisements were to be believed. At any rate, shopping was good at alleviating the little miseries of life. It provided company – not much online shopping then; fantasising over purchases – "Oh my God! Doesn't my bum look big in this?"; and ending with tea and cake out – Like many, I had yet to embrace Italian coffee.

The church, in comparison, was seen as a kill-joy, labelling lust and drunkenness as sins. It identified advertising as fundamentally encouraging the breaking of the tenth commandment, "Thou shalt not covet," or, in modern English, "Don't desire what your neighbour has, including his wife." St Paul picked out this commandment as stimulating the desire to break this and, in turn, the other commandments⁸. The Greek word, *ἐπιθυμία*, as used in the New

⁵ [Ecstasy of Saint Teresa - Wikipedia](#)

⁶ It was in *Civilisation* by Kenneth Clark

⁷ Apparently Teresa's face is that of Bernini's mistress

⁸ Romans 7.7-10. This exegesis is particularly explored in *Romans: A Commentary* (Hermeneia series), Robert Jewett; Fortress Press, 2006

Testament (and also often in Classical Greek) tends to denote 'wrong desire' and above all the desire for sex.

I largely agree with these criticisms of advertising. But it can be turned into an opportunity too. The church created the new roles of retail chaplains to minister both to shop workers (not an easy job) and to shoppers themselves – not to condemn them, but to support them when retail therapy was no longer working for them.

Notice, that the New Testament, perhaps surprisingly, also used 'ἐπιθυμία in a positive sense. One clear example is in Luke's depiction of the Last Supper, where Jesus says, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer."⁹ For emphasis, the root word is used here twice: 'I have desired with desire to eat...' It is not, then, that desire itself is wrong. We are to purify desires.

This is not so much a matter of morals as that in purifying them we are reaching towards the realisation that all our deepest desires are to be met in God. The church, actually, should actively stimulate desire. Consider the pair of parables this evening from Matthew. The merchant desires the treasure and the pearl of great price and abandons all his other desires (he sells everything) to buy these. The parables are not commending greed and covetousness. Jesus is depicted as being concerned to promote desire itself not desire for the material objects, the pearl and the treasure, themselves.

Can, then, our mutual – universal? – experience of desire be a starting point for explaining, commending the Christian faith?

Often the objects of our desires, the pearls and treasures, prove of fleeting satisfaction. The longing for our requested birthday present as a child feels as if it lasts almost for ever. Yet, once the birthday arrives, the longed-for toy is played with for a while and then forgotten. That must-have garment or gadget seems not so glorious once it has been bought and brought home. Serial monogamy illustrates the way we can tire even of people.

I want to explore this theme of sexual desire more, remembering 'ἐπιθυμία often refers to this aspect of the term above

⁹ Luke 22.15

all. Our sexual relationships may begin with crushes, fancying all and sundry. And where opportunity presents, or experimentation begins, coitus may follow. And yet this may leave the desire unsatisfied and the search for another partner begins again, swiping through Tinder. As we emotionally mature we realise that we actually desire a lasting, loving relationship. This might be illustrated by the treasuring of the post-coital experience of resting in each other's arms for ages, relishing the loving union of each other. Here there is satisfaction (although real life as a couple has its challenges – who is in charge of loading the dishwasher?). Yet, there often remains a hunger for more: children. Now sexual intercourse has become about loving a third party, the child-to-be. Desire has become generative.

Analysing this sequence, you may note with me that desire, as first encountered, is disingenuous, pointing to objects or experiences that are not fulfilling. Though there is a quality about this unfulfillable desire, however unworthy it may be. The intensity of this desire partakes in transcendence. But more, the very unfulfillable nature of these desires acts as a hook, drawing us deeper into the more profound nature of desire. A desire, I would say, that is for God.

The second stage is about deep love and relationship-building (of course, these loving relationships are equally found outside family and sexual structures). Here we can start to make an equivalence between desire and love. Furthermore, we may identify more than just the transcendence; we may identify the presence of a personhood to this, God. God is love. It is the core nature of God expressed in the familial relationship of the Holy Trinity¹⁰.

At stage three, the creativity of desire lies in the birth of children. It is not just children, though. Artistic creativity is born of desire also, as is the exploration of ideas and of the world. Desire has moved to a whole new level, speaking theologically, it is sharing in the creative work of God.

Now, unfortunately to my mind, we do not usually identify these desires as the presence of God in our lives. Instead we have images of God in our mind that we find difficult to desire. We hear the First

¹⁰ I write more on this in my sermon on the Holy Trinity on [Sermons – The Chapel](#)

Commandment, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.”¹¹ When I hear it in church I often just feel “FAILURE”. But could we ever desire the construct of God in our minds with that intensity? Indeed, should we even? But desiring desire itself, or desiring love in all its fulness, why then, the First Commandment begins to make a lot of sense. Not a duty, nor a humiliating need, but the reciprocating desire for desire.

This is not something strange, because we already have experiences of intense desire. I suggest that these are the hooks I mentioned, placed by God in us, by God who is desire. Our desires are roads to God. Or, we might say, they are the presence of God Godself within us.

The accounts of Jesus are interesting as they portray a man driven by desire and passion. He is a man who has purified his desire so that not even death can divert him. His debate in the Garden of Gethsemane¹², in which he debates within himself whether to go through with his impending arrest and death, this can be read as submission to his Father. I, however, suggest we read this debate as a move from a shallower ‘I want’ to a uniting of his desire with his Father’s desire. Further, I suggest that this shift was grounded in the strength of his awareness that he was the beloved son – the one desired beyond all else by his Father. It was this awareness that enabled him to remain in a state of desiring, come what may.

The Christian good news is that God also desires us. It is not that we love God, but that God loves us first¹³. “God is love, and those who live in love live in God, and God lives in them”¹⁴. The heart of our desire is to be desired and to be in mutual desire, with transcendent desire, which is God.

In Christian theology, the whole creation, including us, arises out of the desire and love of God. Although we often conceptualise creation as a start with a push, creation is better seen as an end with a pull –

¹¹ Mark 12.30

¹² Mark 14.32-42

¹³ I John 4.19

¹⁴ I John 4.16

hence the emphasis in Christianity on the End, the consummation of all things.

We can be partners in God's work of creating us by his desiring for us, gradually bringing our desires into conformity with God's. To do this our role begins with acknowledging our desires as they are, noticing both their intensities and their waywardness. We can recognise that however partial and ill-formed they are now, they are divinely implanted hooks placed to pull us onwards towards heaven, that is to the full experience of desire, of ecstasy, of rapture, of God.

This is the work of prayer and contemplation (of which I am a very poor exponent). In prayer we are to work with our desires, purifying, deepening, intensifying them. In doing this we are gradually uniting ourselves with God's desires for us. Ultimately uniting ourselves with God, who is desire or love, love which is pure desire.

Thus Bernini was onto something with his erotic but spiritual sculpture of Teresa in Ecstasy. Those who live in desire live in God and God lives in them. Live, then, in desire and love.¹⁵

O Lord our God,
grant us grace to desire you with our whole heart,
that so desiring we may seek and find you;
and so finding you we may love you;
and so loving, we may hate those sins
from which you have delivered us;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Source: St. Anselm of Canterbury, d. 1109

As used as the collect for Prayer During the Day for Wednesday in Common Worship Daily Prayer.

¹⁵I hope this is an interesting and helpful speculative translation exercise: God: desire: love. If at present you wish to leave out the first word of that equivalence, then just concentrate on love and on desire.