

The Love of Friends

4th May 2011

*Many waters cannot quench love,
Nor can the floods drown it.*

Song of Songs

In English, when we speak of love
The word must do
The work of four or five.
If I say "I love him," people will
assume
I mean my soulmate,
Companion of my life,
Bound to me by chords
Stronger than steel.

But it can also mean
My father, brother, son,
relationships
That in other tongues
Have endearments of their own.

Strangest of all
We have no words to speak
The love of friendship,
That love the Greeks call *philia*.
Even for a girl to say "I love you"
To a female friend
Can be a touch embarrassing,
Even when it's true, and right,
Is what that friend needs most,
And has no sense of *Eros*
At all. And for two men,
It's worse; the English cannot bear
The sentiment, and cringe
Before such sloppy words.
And if you think that's bad,
Think how it sounds
If I say "I love you"
To my best friend's man!

And yet... eight days ago
I saw my much-loved friend
Laid in ground he chose,
And in the afternoon
Heard the tale of how he'd said
"I love you" to a man
Honoured, respected, widely loved,
Unimpeachable beyond the slightest
doubt,
And all around me wept.

Is there so much love in life,
Such cornucopia of joy,
That we should acquiesce
In these conventions
That deny us all the words to tell
How deep, and broad, and high
Is the love we bear each other,
The mirror of that great love-song
Our Saviour sings?
No! I say it is not so,
And as my friend loved me,
And told me so,
And as I mourn him, miss him, love
him,
I will follow where he leads,
And say "I love you"
When it's needed, and it's true.

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