

The text we heard a moment ago from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is among the best known and most often cited passages in all of his letters. It has been called his "hymn to love." Couples often choose it as a reading for their wedding Mass.

In our culture, the word love has many meanings. It is used for everything from sexual desire to romantic love, from friendship to the shades and variations of emotion that exist among the individuals and generations that make up a family. Some use it in a still broader sense to include such things as love of art or of an animal, love of a house or a favourite holiday site.

In the Greek tradition, out of which the language of the New Testament comes, the ordinary word for love was eros. It suggests desire and longing, whether of a physical or of a spiritual nature. In the New Testament, the word for love is agape, the model for which is Jesus who, the Gospel of John tells us, loved us and gave himself for us.

In today's reading, Paul is thinking of the love that he believes should mark the life of a Christian community. In 1 Corinthians, the apostle is attempting to deal with divisions and conflicts that have grown up in the Corinthian church and, in his mind, are on the point of destroying it. Almost everything that he writes

here is intended to underline the importance of love and to warn us against those attitudes and actions that threaten it.

Paul begins by describing love as a “more excellent way.” For him, it is the key, both to the quality of our lives as individuals and to the success or failure of our communities. Although he is thinking primarily about the community of the church, what he says has implications for all the communities in which we find ourselves, especially the family.

In a somewhat heightened rhetorical style, Paul affirms the superiority of love to every other spiritual and intellectual gift of which he can think. If I can speak the language of angels or have prophetic power and possess all knowledge, he says, or if I have the kind of faith that works miracles, or if I give away all my possessions, and I do not have love, he concludes, I am nothing. For Paul, love is the distinguishing feature of a genuinely human and Christian life.

When it comes to what love is, Paul focuses on two characteristics; “Love,” he says, “is patient; love is kind.” Although patience has always been important for any kind of community life, we are probably more inclined to be impatient today than ever before. Speed is something to which we are accustomed, and when we are forced to slow down, we become restless, anxious, in a word,

impatient. This is obviously true when it comes to our driving; it is equally the case in many other contexts from the doctor's office to the cashier's counter in the grocery store. We don't like being obliged to wait.

The second thing Paul says of love is that it is kind, a word that evokes a host of other things – gentleness, understanding, forgiveness, caring. We have all seen how small acts of kindness can make an enormous difference to people and to their relationship to us. Nor does it take a great effort to be kind. What it demands more than anything is an awareness of others and a sensitivity to them and to their hopes and fears, their needs and concerns.

Paul develops at greater length his understanding of what love is not than what it is. Practically every word he uses in this context has relevance to one or other of the attitudes that have grown up in the Corinthian church and are threatening to ruin its common life. They are the kind of things that can undermine the life of any community, whether that of family or friends, of a school or a workplace.

Love, Paul says, is not envious or boastful, not arrogant or rude, not irritable or resentful. It does not insist on always getting its own way. I am sure

that most of us have witnessed such attitudes and perhaps at times have had them ourselves, and seen how destructive they can be.

The last part of the hymn compares love with other spiritual and human gifts and concludes that in the end nothing is more important, more life-enriching than love. The passage ends with a brief but pointed statement of Paul's conviction about the significance of love. "Faith, hope and love abide," he says, "and the greatest of these is love."

When it comes to love, none of us is perfect. We are not always patient or kind. We don't always avoid envy, arrogance and all the other negative things that Paul sees as incompatible with love.

As Christians, however, we have a unique source of inspiration and help in our efforts to become more loving. In the Eucharist, the risen Christ gives himself to us in the very act of his self-giving love. This is my body given for you, my life-blood poured out for your salvation. In communion, we are invited to open ourselves to being transformed by his love so that, in the course of our lives, we might become ever more increasingly people of love.